“Mary had a little lamb, its fleece was white as snow, and everywhere that Mary went, the lamb was sure to go.” Sounds kind of silly to be starting a sermon off this way but this little nursery rhyme has a profound thought in it that raises the question, “Would you follow someone everywhere they went? Would you follow Jesus wherever He goes?” Following Jesus – what does that mean? What does it mean to you and to me?

Over the past few weeks we have looked at several different stories from Jesus’ life and ministry. We have seen Him heal a Roman officer’s servant by simply speaking the word from afar; out of pure love and compassion, He raised a widow’s son from the dead. While eating dinner, as a guest in the home of a Pharisee, a local woman, known to be a sinner, comes and anoints His feet and Jesus honors her. During this time He has fed over 5000 people, and taught them through parables. Then one day He crosses the Sea of Galilee and heals a man possessed of demons. When the man wants to come with Him, Jesus sends him back to the town that has rejected him and says to go back and tell every one of all the things that God has done for him.

Today we have another story that talks about Jesus and people that want to follow or are invited to follow Him and it really hits home as to what it takes, what it can really cost to follow Jesus.

First we have to look at Jesus. What is it about Jesus that makes following Him so important? In Ephesians 1, Paul talks about how God made known to us the “mystery of His will, which He purposed in Christ.” “Mystery” does not mean an unsolved riddle, as in a Sherlock Holmes novel. “Mystery,” in this case means something that can only be known by divine revelation. God revealed His purpose, by sending Jesus. It was there all along, i.e. in the Old Testament witness, but we did not see it. What is God’s purpose? We have to go all of the way back to the beginning, to creation, to find it. What did God want from the very beginning? He wanted a creation that lived in harmony with Him. He created all things, and ultimately humans, to live in total fellowship with Him, that just like the God-head, we would live in complete fellowship and understanding of and with one another. As the book, “The Shack” so beautifully illustrates, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are in perfect unity and fellowship of thought and mind. This is what God wanted for us, to be with Him in this same way. But sin entered.

We rebelled and did what we wanted to do and not as He wanted. So He tried to bring us back by intervening in history and through natural disasters. When this didn’t catch our attention He finally chose to work through one small group of people who would show forth the beauty of complete fellowship with God. They were not chosen so that they would be separate, and feel more special than anyone else. They were chosen to simply
obey God and to be witnesses to all of the rest of humanity, witnesses to show forth the praises of Him who calls us out of darkness into His marvelous light. This too failed because these people didn’t want to be different. They wanted to be like all the others while at the same time boasting that they were “in” while the rest of humanity was “out.” They never tried to win anyone to God. Instead they chose to rebel and not follow God and do as He wanted, and so God sent Jesus.

Jesus is that perfect man, the second Adam, the one who, by total submission of His will to the will of the Father, and not by divine right, shows us what is possible if we but follow Him. Nothing in Jesus’ life or ministry was done by divine prerogative. Every miracle He did, every sermon or lesson He taught and preached was done for one purpose – to reveal God and the beauty of fellowship with Him. This is what Jesus came to show and to teach us. If we take it as anything less than that, then we have missed the point.

Jesus was not just “a good man;” He didn’t come to show us some good rules to live by; He was not just a social activist with some common sense ideas. He was God in the flesh. He was the One who was promised, who would bring us back to full fellowship and relationship with God. All that He said and did was first and foremost to bring us back to God. As it says in Romans, “ALL have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” but through Jesus the way is now opened for us to return to God and to be adopted back as sons and daughters of the Holy One, just as the prodigal son was “adopted back” into fellowship with his father. We now have the way opened for our relationship with God to be restored.

But to do this, to know this adoption back into God’s family, there is a cost, and that is what is talked about in today’s gospel – the cost of discipleship, the cost of following Jesus. Let me say first that following Jesus does not mean something scary or worrisome. It simply means that we have to give up our “natural” ways of thinking about things and look at things through God’s eyes; through God’s understanding. It does not mean that you will be thrown to the proverbial lion’s den or live in a cave somewhere like John the Baptist. What this means is taking God at His word and going, following, where He leads.

We start with the story of the disciples and Jesus arriving in a Samaritan town. Somehow they have been informed that Jesus’ plan is to go to Jerusalem and not to spend time with them. Remember, in a previous story, that Jesus came to Samaria and met the woman at the well. Many people believed and so Jesus spent several days in Samaria, teaching and doing wonders. This time is different. His mission has changed. He has new marching orders from on High. The Samaritans don’t understand this and so they are feeling insulted on a couple of different levels. First, they considered Mt. Gerazim to be the holy place of worship, as opposed to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. That Jesus is set to go there and not to this “holy place” is an insult.

Secondly, they probably remember the last time and how He stayed with them. Now, He’s only stopping to get a meal and a little rest, and then go on. So, they are feeling like they no longer mean anything to him, but in this we see a lesson about following Jesus. Sometimes when we follow where God leads it may seem to some that we are ignoring
them when that is not the case. We simply have to go to the place where God is leading. They may also think that we have no consideration of their religious beliefs or perhaps that we are claiming ours are better than theirs. Again, this is not so, but it comes down to obeying God rather than men and not arguing with people about a point that is not being asked. We have to follow where God leads.

Next we come to three people who want to follow Jesus.

- The first is very typical of all of us. He comes up to Jesus and says “I will follow you wherever you go.” This is so like us and in some ways. We have a spiritual experience or see something that dazzles our imaginations and right away we want in, but we fail to count the cost of what it is going to actually entail to follow through. I’m not suggesting that all snap decisions are wrong, but simply that at some point, on some level, we do need to recognize that there is a cost involved and we have to consider that before we make ourselves look foolish.

  That is what Jesus addresses with this man. Have you really counted the cost of what it takes? I don’t even have a place to lay my head at night; I never know where I will end up and always have to rely on someone else for that. Have you counted the cost? This is very similar to Peter when he too says that he is willing to die for Jesus. Jesus responds by saying, “Peter, you don’t know what you’re talking about. In fact, you’ll deny me three times before tomorrow morning.”

  We don’t know the outcome with this man, if he did follow or if he became discouraged and returned home. The cost of following should not become a deterrent or an excuse to not follow Jesus; this is simply one thing that needs to be considered. Rest assured that if God has called you to something, He will be faithful to provide for it.

- The next man is called by Jesus to follow. This man’s response was, “Okay, I’ll follow after I have taken care of my family and discharged those responsibilities. Once that is done, I’ll follow.” To follow Jesus should be the deepest desire of our soul; it should be the one thing that takes precedence over anything else. Considering the average family of that time, this man probably had other siblings to whom he could have handed over these responsibilities which ardently drew him away from following. When Jesus calls, our first thought should be one of excitement and joy and a readiness to follow. I remember when I first knew a call to overseas missions. My parents were much older than others of my age and I knew that they might very well pass away while I was overseas, but I also knew that this was a much bigger notion than anything else I had known previously. I knew that I had to follow it through even if it meant not being around should my parents die. So Jesus tells this man, let the dead bury the dead; you preach the kingdom.

- The last man also says that he wants to follow Jesus but he has to go home and say his goodbyes to the family. This could take some time because saying goodbye in that culture was not merely as easy as going home, giving mom a kiss on the cheek, shaking dad’s hand and leaving. It could be a protracted time and sometimes the call won’t wait. When Jesus calls it is something that has to be done now.
The point of each of these stories is that to follow Jesus it will cost you something. I'm of the opinion that if it does not cost us anything, then it's never worth very much to us and is easily discarded or left to go to waste. What does it cost us to follow Jesus? What would it cost each of these men? In a word – control. Each of these men wanted to maintain some degree of control over their lives. Yes I will do that but only after I do this first. Do we allow God's grace and mercy to trump our plans and shape our lives or do we shape our faith to fit the lives we have already planned? Jesus understands this very well and He will not let go. If He is calling it cannot be ignored and it won't just go away. The Kingdom of God must come before everything else; it must cost something or it will never mean anything to us other than nice words on a printed page or as verses in a hymn. We want control but what we don't see is that we are not in control. At any moment something could happen that would prove that, and yet we still cling to the notion that “we can work it out.” Jesus shows us that that is not true but does promise us that He will take that feeling of being out of control, walk with us, and bring us to the other side.

Yes it is hard to “leave behind,” to “let the dead bury the dead.” I know that feeling. I also know the glares of those you love and who love you when they feel that you are doing something foolish. It is only because they don’t understand Who is calling you. It’s at those times we still have to follow, to let their opinions be said, and in spite of them, continue on. It’s only then, that we will finally find that beauty of restored relationship with God through Jesus. It’s only then that we will come to understand the mystery that God intended all along; to have us be in complete fellowship with Him. And it is only then that we will know the truth of the words of apocalypse, “the kingdoms of this world have become the Kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ.”

So, to paraphrase that nursery rhyme, “Jesus has some little lambs, which He made white as snow; and everywhere that Jesus leads, will you go? Amen.