

s-Ep3A-08-Magical Mystery Tour  
Isaiah 9:2-7 *The people who lived in darkness*  
Mt. 4:12-25 *"Repent, for the Kingdom is near"*  
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## MAGICAL MYSTERY TOUR

In this modern day of cell phones, text messaging, emails, and so forth, it's become much easier to track down somebody you're trying to reach. So much so, that youngsters are now used to being in touch at the drop of a hat—you're never alone; you're always as close as the press of a button to someone.

Some old dinosaurs like me find that notion a little disturbing. I don't want to reach out and touch someone 24 hours a day! And to me, solitude means peace and quiet, rather than isolation. Well, what a brave new world that has such people in it!

Recently, a friend of mine planned a day of activity as a surprise for her husband. Once upon a time, we burnt-out old hippies would've called it a "magical mystery tour," but I think Linda referred to it as "a friendly kidnapping." She told him she was taking him out for the day, but not what they would do or where they would go.

It's not hard to work up enough trust to go with the flow when somebody who loves you invites you for a mysterious treat—but I wonder what Simon, Andrew, James and John thought when Jesus—a total stranger—appeared out of the blue and invited *them* on a mystery journey. Bushwhacked! Because, in accepting Jesus' call, their lives changed so dramatically that there was no going back.

If you travel in Galilee today, they'll show you a boat that might have belonged to Andrew and Peter or maybe the Zebedees. It was a remarkable archeological find, this boat, discovered sticking out of the mud one summer when the level of the Sea of Galilee was lower than usual because of dry weather. With great care, it was lifted up, cleaned and preserved. Now, tourists can go and see the sort of boat that Jesus' apostles used for fishing. The thing's even been carbon-dated so we know it really does date from the time of Jesus.

Although it's an archaeological artifact and not a religious relic, that boat is a vivid reminder that Jesus' followers were just plain folks. It cost them a lot to drop everything and follow Jesus. They were, by today's standards, small businessmen, working families, guys making just enough for the necessities and

maybe a little more. Fish were plentiful, but it was always dangerous work. Their lives were probably relatively secure, but I'm sure there were some serious ups and downs.

Why ditch it all to follow an itinerant preacher?

The same question faces people today. Why give up a life of relative security to embark on a magical mystery tour? Why indeed?

A week ago Friday I went up to Pleasant Hill to attend my In-Care student's final interview with our Conference's Committee on the Ministry, Section A. Section A's task is screening and supporting folks who believe they are called to the Christian ministry in the United Church of Christ. They are a lovely group of dedicated people, but formal meetings with them can be a nerve-wracking experience. So much depends on the decisions they make. One way or another, there's no going back.

Most of us, if we have the luxury of choosing, pick a line of work based on our interests, our talents, the job market, and a host of practical considerations. Not so with ministry. Ministers don't choose. They get bushwacked by Jesus. They get called out of whatever ordinary existence they enjoy and into a magical mystery tour that continues to be both mysterious and magical until the day they die. And the powers that be—for good or for ill—can screen out, hinder, or support that ministry. It's dangerous work, and might even be less secure than fishing.

So I am sure it will raise the hair on the back of your neck for me to remind you that we are ALL called into ministry—that's you, and you, and you—every last one of us! Ministry isn't specialized work, relegated just to those who are willing and able to jump through the hoops of organized religion and fight their way through the pain and glory of the ordination process. And ordination doesn't suddenly give pastors more or better ability, or wisdom, or strength. We make it our main focus, but that doesn't let the rest of you off the hook.

Uh-uh. Nobody gets off easy. We're all on the bus, so to speak—and we all have to peddle to keep the bust going. All of us, Christians one and all—we're on a magical mystery tour of ministry!

What's that, you say? Not you? Well, but why not you?

Take Moses, for instance. Recall that he killed a man back in Egypt and now he's trying to lay low, working for his father-in-law in Midian. He's out with the sheep on a perfectly normal day, when out of the blue a bush catches on fire

and starts talking to him! "I am the Lord your God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I have heard the cry of my people. I have seen their suffering. I have come down to deliver them... Now guess where YOU'RE going?"

Bushwacked! Bushwacked by God!

Or remember a little boy named Samuel, fast asleep after a hard day of helping out in the Temple of Jerusalem. In the middle of the night, he wakes up because somebody's calling his name. He's just a little kid, but maybe that's why God has chosen him for the magical mystery tour. "The voice of God will be spoken to a *new generation*. Now guess where YOU'RE going?"

Isaiah was a young adult—and like many young adults wasn't too keen on going to church, or rather to the synagogue. Maybe the sermon was boring, or the music too old-fashioned. But his mom insisted he go, and then, without any warning, the heavens open and he hears a voice saying, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?"

And Isaiah tries to get out of the job: "Oh, no. You don't want ME. Hey, I'm kind of a wild man. I've been out of line and I'm nobody's role model."

And the voice says, "Perfect! We need somebody who'll tell it like it is. Guess where YOU'RE going?"

And of course, the apostle Paul—self-righteous, intellectual snob, lover of violence and hater of Christians—on his way to Damascus and POW! Blinded and bushwacked and next thing you know he's DRIVING the bus on the mystery tour!

So see? I bet most of you are here today because you think that YOU chose to get up early, put on your duds and come out in the winter weather to church. Uh-uh. You've been bushwacked. You are here because God sought you out, called your name, brought you down, and put you here.

You're here because you're part of the magical mystery tour. You're here, because God said to you, in one way or another, "Guess where YOU'RE going?" And bless you, you're here because you were willing to take a leap of faith and come along for the ride!

When we meet Jesus in today's reading, we are introduced to him pretty much as he was: always on a journey, always on the move. The man never seemed to sit down and rest.

He's walking along a road, and sees some guys bending over their nets in a boat. So he calls out to them, "Hey, you! Follow me! Guess where YOU'RE going?"

I bet they never could've guessed. Because he took them places they never would've gone by themselves. Can you relate? I bet you can. How many times has one step turned out to be the beginning of a journey you never thought you'd take?

Bill Willimon relates that he often is asked how he came to be a famous preacher. The truth is, back when he was a junior in college, a friend invited him to go to a conference on "Exploring Ministry." It wasn't something Bill had thought about at all. And although he went along for the ride, he wasn't particularly impressed—until the last evening, when a group of ministers got together in a hotel room to reminisce. Those veteran pastors had some real stories to tell. They'd been in the trenches of the Civil Rights Movement; they'd had to put their lives on the line. They'd seen it all.

And Bill, being a pretty naïve white boy, thought, "Hey, this sounds great! I didn't know that being a Methodist preacher was this much fun!"

Well, he didn't know it at the time, since he really didn't know much of anything about Jesus or the church, but Jesus was telling him—right then and there—"Guess where YOU'RE going?"

A church member asked me the other day what she could say to gently counter a friend who keeps pushing at her to pinpoint the day and the hour and the moment she "took Jesus into her heart." Well, I'm here to say that it doesn't usually work that way. We don't make the decision to follow Christ—we don't take Jesus anywhere; HE takes US places! You can't "give your life to Christ." He takes it! He takes it and makes it his own.

And so it isn't all that important when exactly you "decided to follow Christ." The important thing is that you answered the invitation with a "yes," and that you're on the tour with the rest of us.

All of you are here because Jesus put you here. I know that for some of you the process was dramatic and life-changing—the original E-ticket ride. For others it's been a lifetime of quiet travel, with some ups and downs along the way. Maybe your journey of faith has been a series of little baby steps—a few forward, a few backward, like some kind of metaphysical cha-cha-cha. But for every last one of us, God reached in, grabbed us, called us, summoned us.

Maybe you were just an infant at the time. That's pretty common in the UCC—most folks are baptized as babies, and never remember a time when they weren't more or less a Christian. Nobody asked you about it, did they?—they just poured that water over your head. And I bet you screamed and thought something like, "Boy, I'm glad that's over!"

Uh-uh. You were bushwacked. You probably don't recall it, but at the time everybody in that church said something like, "Guess where YOU'RE going?"

This isn't the luxury tour we're on. Seems like we have to work for our passage, and it isn't always easy. Sometimes we try and we fail. But that's OK because we're weren't invited because we're perfect. We're not called to ministry

because we're successful, or nice or even friendly. We're called because there's room on the bus and Jesus wants us along. Jesus is on the move.

So let's get this show on the road! Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

Beloved God, who makes all things new, open our eyes to new sights and new experiences of faith and inspiration. Give us all the push we need to get up and get going when we hear you calling our names. Lead us in ways of understanding so that we get the most out of our new experiences. Help us grow in fellowship, love, and creative service—every day of our lives. This we pray, most earnestly. Amen.

RESOURCES:

Willimon, William, "Guess Where You're Going?" *Pulpit Resource*, Jan-Mar 2008, pp17-20.