O God of searchers and restless souls: be present with us this day as we do our best to do the impossible - to follow you with a consistent faithfulness. Keep us going by the hearing of your sacred word read and preached. May it then work deep in us to shape our unfolding lives. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Our FIOS subscription offers something like 1,000 television channels, but when my wife and I settle in for a night at home with some TV, we’re often at a loss to find anything to watch. Recently, we’ve retreated to old episodes of “Fraser,” a sitcom that ran from 1993 to 2004. All 264 episodes are there for you on Netflix. If you don’t know the show, the protagonists are a pair of bookish, snobbish adult brothers named Fraser and Niles. They’re both snooty and rather effete psychologists in Seattle, but they’re somehow loveable anyway.

In one particular episode we laughed our way through not long ago, Fraser and Niles have been cornered into participating in a bicycle race fundraising event. The only problem is that neither of them learned to ride a bicycle as children. They can’t back out of the fundraiser, so the episode follows them as they struggle to learn bicycle riding as humiliated adults. How to confess that they can’t do it? Who’ll teach them? How do you learn to ride a bike as a grown man? At one point in this comic crisis, nerdy Niles has what he thinks is a brainstorm of an idea. He cries out, “The library! I bet the Seattle Public Library has dozens of books on...
how to ride a bicycle!” Typical Niles. If you want to know something, you get yourself a book about it. But in the end, both he and Fraser are smart enough to know that you can’t learn to ride a bike from a book. Tuck that story away for later in this sermon.

Last fall, your ministers were invited to speak at our Brick Church Sunday morning Adult Education class. We were each asked to tell the story of how we were called to the ministry. I began by confessing that I had “call-story envy.” I envied ministers who had really good, out-of-the-blue, bolt-of-lightning, super-dramatic call stories. I envied ministers like the famous Peter Marshall, once Chaplain to the U.S. Senate, whose call came to him when he tripped while hiking the foggy Yorkshire moors, nearly falling to his death over a cliff, saved only by a mysterious voice calling his name. My call story, I confessed, was quintessentially pedestrian. I grew up in a church-going family; I never much rebelled; I utterly failed to mis-spend my youth. My faith matured gradually. A vague sense of calling to the ministry led me to seminary. At first, I wasn’t quite sure why I was there.

As I told my story to the Adult Ed class, I confessed that half-way through my three years at Princeton Seminary, I decided that the only way I could know if I was really called to be a minister was to actually be a minister for a while, at least a “sort-of” minister. So I took a year off school and accepted an invitation to be a student intern in a real live congregation in Fort Wayne, Indiana, of all places. And it was there, in a real church, being a real (if junior) minister, there, in the actual doing of it, that I came to understand that ministry was indeed what I was called to do with my life. My point is this: I could not have known this from the outside; I had to come to understand it from the inside.

All four Gospels tell the story of Jesus calling his first disciples. It always happens right after His baptism, the event Doug preached about last Sunday. In John’s Gospel, as is often the case, the tale is told from a different angle. The first three Gospels mention nothing about the disciples looking for the Messiah. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, they seem to be minding their business when Jesus finds them.
But the Fourth Gospel, John, portrays the disciples – or at least some of them – as religious searchers. As Gracey read a moment ago, one of them, named Philip, excitedly reports, “We have found him about whom Moses and the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” The person who hears this little report is one Nathaniel. Nathaniel snidely responds by asking, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” What he doubtless meant was that Nazareth was a Podunk town up north in crazy Galilee – hardly a likely place for the Messiah to come from.

Philip responds to this cynicism by saying to Nathaniel, “Come and see.” By the way, the Greek word that’s translated as “see” really means something more like “perceive” or “experience.” The English would not be as felicitous, but you could translate Philip’s invitation as, “Come, and experience it for yourself.”

The order of the two words matters. It’s “come and see,” not “see and come.” Nathaniel is being invited to come and follow Jesus before he really knows much about Jesus. You can only surmise that this is because some things – often the really big things in life – can only be known from the inside. Nathaniel doesn’t have it all wrapped up when he starts to follow Jesus. He hasn’t even met Jesus yet. Nathaniel doesn’t really believe anything about Jesus yet. He’ll only start to believe later when Jesus speaks to him, after he starts to follow.

Same thing for you and me. There are a great many importantly true things that you can’t know from the outside; you have to try them on; you have to experience them yourself to know them. Learning about them is not enough; you have to do them. That’s the way it was for me and the ministry. Actually, most people who come to follow Jesus are like Nathaniel and me. You have to “come” before you “see,” you have to just do it, to try it, to experience it for yourself; you have to learn it from the inside.

A couple of years ago, I was invited to write the forward to a book, a collection of essays about the transition from being a seminarian to being an actual minister. But what I wrote applies equally to all of us on the way into faith, moving from “coming” into “seeing.”

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.
I wrote this piece before I saw that episode of *Fraser* about the bicycle charity event, but it circles back to Niles wanting to go to the Seattle Library for books of bicycle riding. Here’s what I wrote: “You learn to ride a bicycle by riding a bicycle. Pre-riding instructions on the theory and practice of bicycling can be enormously helpful — “you put your feet on these pedal things and your hands here, and when you want to stop you squeeze these things.” But you can only learn to do it by actually throwing a leg over the saddle and doing it. Indeed the first few hundred yards are usually terrifying, no matter how thoroughly you were prepped. In fact, most new riders, whether young or old, fall over at least once... there will be crashes and scraped knees, all a necessary part of learning.”

Most of what we might know about God can be found only in the very act of following God. Those two disciples seem to have grasped this. They understood that the deepest understanding of things spiritual is hidden from the eyes of those who do not take the spiritual road, because the road itself is the teacher. *The road itself is the teacher.* If you never take to the road, if you don’t stay on it, you’ll never know. In order to see anything, you have to come and follow. Some things, usually things that matter, can only be known from the inside. You can’t know until you try.

This means you gotta take some risks, of course. The road is always a bit risky. The only thing more dangerous than the road is not going anywhere. This is true in our careers. A job is always a risk if it’s worth doing. It’s also true in relationships. You know love is true and lasting by doing it, not looking down at it from a distance.

And it’s patently true in matters of faith. I mean, you come to church and worship, even though worship is still odd and jolting, even though you’re still working on the God and Jesus thing. You pray, silently or aloud, even though you’re still not sure about prayer, whether it works, how it works. You sing hymns with lovely words even though you don’t fancy yourself much of a singer and even though the words are sometimes a bit cryptic in your ears. You join in saying the Confession of Faith, just as we will after this sermon, even though some of it still seems

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inscrutable. You hear the Bible read or read it yourself, even though it sometimes baffles and discomforts.

In the Eleventh Century, a philosopher named Anselm of Canterbury advanced an idea that was first identified with Augustine of Hippo some 600 years earlier. It’s often called by Anselm’s Latin, “fides quaerens intellectum” – “faith seeking understanding.” Please note that it’s not the reverse; it’s not “understanding seeking faith.” That is to say, Anselm – no incredulous post-modern skeptic – understood that we began by “coming” in order that we might come to “see.” We begin with the risk; we begin with the trust; we begin by doing faith – worshiping, studying, serving, praying…, believing. And it is in this actual doing of faith that we come to understand – from the inside – the dear and deep truth that we could never have known from the outside.

_In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen._