

PLAYING FOLLOW THE LEADER by Dr. Barry H. Downing

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PLAYING FOLLOW THE LEADER This is a sermon that Dr. Barry H. Downing recently shared at West Union Presbyterian Church (Ohio) on Jan 25, 2009

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 Numbers 9:15-23; Mark 1:9-20

Dr. Barry H. Downing

Text: Mark 1:17 “And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men.’”

UFOs have been in the news this past year. An Associated Press article by Angela Brown reported UFOs seen in Stephenville, Texas, one of which was a mile long. It was noted in the article that a 2007 Associated Press poll found that 14 percent of Americans believe they have seen a UFO. That works out to be about 40 million Americans. The British Ministry of Defense is now in a four year program to release its UFO documents, at least its unclassified ones. One of the reports stated that an American pilot was ordered by ground radar to shoot down a UFO over England in 1957. The UFO flew away before the pilot could pull the trigger. The pilot is still alive, and living in Florida. He confirmed the report. I am a member of an organization called the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON), and our researchers know that dozens of UFOs are reported all over the world every month. Of course, our official government position is that UFOs do not exist, except as misidentification of known objects, such as Venus, advanced aircraft, or maybe swamp gas. Needless to say I am more than a little suspicious that our government has been lying to us for more than 50 years about UFOs.

What if our government is lying? Why should Christians care? If UFOs are a matter for national security, well then, the government lies about these issues all the time. Or, whoever the UFO guys are, they do not seem to be bothering us much. Probably some scientists are paid by the government to carry out some kind of secret project. Why should this concern Christians?

There are many ways to define what it means to be a Christian, but there is hardly a better way than to say a Christian is someone who follows Jesus. In today’s Lectionary text from Mark, Jesus sees the brothers Simon Peter and Andrew fishing, he invites them to follow him—to play follow the leader—and they accept his call. They agree to play Jesus’ game. Eventually this call goes out through the voice of the disciples, after his resurrection, to all the world. In the name of Jesus I call you to play follow the leader.

We in the church say it takes faith to follow Jesus. People who are not in the church, those writing books these days promoting atheism, men like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, would say it doesn’t take faith to follow Jesus, it takes stupidity, it takes blind prejudice, it takes a willingness to ignore scientific truth in favor of superstition. You know this is where we stand in the church now. This is a hard place for us Presbyterians to be because we Presbyterians have always seen ourselves as on the side of education, on the side of science, we Presbyterians started many colleges in the United States. Princeton University was started as a place to educate Presbyterian clergy. And now, in almost any university of the United States, Christianity is suspect. Yes, you can be tolerated as a Christian on a college campus, but you better not talk about your faith too much —or you will be seen as a religious fanatic, and we do not want that, do we? And you better be careful about saying that Jesus is the Christ, and the only Christ. That suggests that you think Christianity is superior to Judaism, or Islam, or Buddhism, or Hinduism, and that would not be politically correct, would it? Political correctness does not want to “privilege” one religion over another. Treating Jesus academically is fine— to see Jesus as one religious leader among dozens, or hundreds, is fine. But be careful about saying you follow Jesus, and him alone, that sounds narrow minded. When you join the Presbyterian Church, you are asked, “Who is your Lord and Savior?” And the expected answer is, “Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.” The reason the books by atheists are selling so well now is that among a large crop of educated people in the Western world, to make the very confession of faith we Presbyterians make is to make yourself look narrow minded, limited in your spiritual vision. You follow Jesus, and him alone? Why?

When your pastor Lisa asked me to preach, she asked me to talk some more about my interest in UFOs, Unidentified Flying Objects, and their possible implications for our Christian faith. At first I was not sure I wanted to do this, but as I looked at the Lectionary text for today in Mark’s Gospel, it seemed perhaps appropriate.

Let me explain how I got going on UFOs and the Bible, more than 40 years ago. I majored in physics in college, went to Princeton Seminary, and began to see the problems that our scientific world view was presenting for our Christian faith. A key moment came in a class on Christian doctrine when the professor said to the class, “No one today believes in the Ascension of Jesus, do they? And if Jesus did not Ascend to heaven, where is his body? We suppose his bones like

buried somewhere in the middle east.” This statement shocked me. Here was one of Princeton’s outstanding professors saying not only did he not believe in the Ascension, or the Resurrection, but neither did anyone else he knew, meaning other educated theologians like himself.

Here was the problem. If Jesus did not ascend to heaven, how can we hope for life beyond death for ourselves? Does this mean we are all dead, and that’s that? If that is true, what is the point of preaching all this God stuff? Why go into the ministry? What should I say at a funeral? “I know you are sorry Aunt Matilda is dead, and we used to believe she would be in heaven now, but our scientific world view won’t let us believe superstitious things like that now, so have a good time being dead, Aunt Matilda, we will miss you.” The professor explained our new age of doubt by saying that the Copernican revolution in astronomy took away the concept of the flat earth, hell below, heaven above, earth in the middle. And it was not long before my professor’s views went public, in a book by Bishop John A.T. Robinson called *Honest to God*. This became a lead book in what became known as the “death of God” movement of the 1960’s, and this atheistic legacy in the church has been kept alive by those like Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong. Anything in the Bible that seems supernatural is seen as myth, as the product of pre-scientific thinking.

I do not think any of us can suppose this argument does not make sense. We know there are primitive people in the world who believe things we see as superstitious, people who believe that someone has put a curse on them. We are suspicious of Christian groups who will not use modern medicine. We may even watch some Christian groups on TV that seem fanatical to us, and we may say to ourselves, “You know, the atheists have a point.”

But if the atheists have a point, why are we still here, trying to be Presbyterian Christians? And back in Princeton Seminary in 1963 I was only months away from graduation, and one of my professors had put a hard question to me: is Christianity really a fraud? Is it all superstition? Is God superstition? That was not a good place to be my senior year in seminary.

I decided I needed to do graduate study in the area of eschatology—which deals with issues like heaven, and life after death—and the scientific implications of these issues. I went to the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, studying under Prof. John McIntyre, and Prof. T.F. Torrance, both now deceased. Prof. Torrance’s son is now President of Princeton Seminary. Here is my dissertation title: *Eschatological Implications of the Understanding of Time and Space in the Thought of Isaac Newton*.

You do not have to get excited about that dissertation title, but I want you to see that I was digging around in 17th century science trying to figure how we lost Jesus and his resurrection. What I realized was that large sections of the liberal church had quit believing in angels, in what I would call the whole extraterrestrial order reported in the Bible. Beings from above come to earth, and then go away—that is the biblical story. Why was it that we could no longer believe this?

And we were on the edge of the space age. Sputnik had gone around the world while I was in college, and UFOs were being reported frequently—denied by our government of course—but reported. And so I asked myself, “What if beings in UFOs were involved in developing the Bible, what if UFOs carry what the Bible calls the angelic reality?” I finished my Ph.D. in May of 1966, came home to America, set up shop in the basement of my in-laws—I did not have a church yet—and wrote *The Bible and Flying Saucers*. I eventually received a call to Northminster Presbyterian Church in Endwell, where your pastor Lisa was in my youth group. I was ordained on March 5, 1967, and my book was published in April of 1968. This was the reaction to my book: religious liberals ignored it, religious conservatives hated it. Liberals did not want to deal with the possibility that the Red Sea did part, and that Jesus did rise from the dead—that there are forces flying in our skies right now that could make these things happen. So liberals pretended my book did not exist, and if the United States government was lying about UFOs, it was fine with them. Conservatives hated my book because they did not want their angels turned into astronauts flying space ships. At almost exactly the same time my book was published, Eric von Daniken published *Chariots of the Gods?* which argued that the angels in the Bible were really astronauts who had nothing to do with God. Von Daniken’s books sold millions, while mine sold a few hundred thousand. Because I argue that UFOs are not just astronauts here to pick up a few rocks, they are the ones who guide—perhaps even rule—life on earth. The public media loved von Daniken, but not Downing.

But here is what I think is true: if you are going to play follow the leader with Jesus, what kind of Jesus are you going to believe in? Is Jesus just a guy who went around preaching love, and then was crucified, dead, end of story? Or was Jesus part of an extraterrestrial revelation, did he come from what he called “the kingdom of heaven,” some place not on earth, and when we die, do we go to the place of the angels? That is what the New Testament teaches. Do we stay with this? Or do we join the atheists in seeing Jesus as a nice guy, but powerless, and dead? Many of my critics have suggested that to try to save the heavenly Jesus with UFOs is not worth the effort. And I realize many people are able to believe the Bible as it is, and not worry about modern science. If that is true for you, then my concerns are not your concerns, I understand that.

But here is the issue for me. Suppose UFOs are real, suppose our government has lied to us—just as Pharaoh in

Egypt frequently lied to Moses — then how do we know they are not the angels of God? And shouldn't the church be wondering about the signs of strange powers in our skies?

Most of you know about the "wheels of Ezekiel," that strange metallic object that Ezekiel saw flying in the sky, which came near him, and eventually picked him up and carried him to the river Chebar. (Notice this: there are UFO abductions in the Bible.) Likewise the prophet Elijah was taken up into the sky in a chariot of fire (2Ki. 2:11). But for me the most critical UFO in the Old Testament is the pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night reported during the Exodus (13:21,22).

What is a pillar of cloud by day, and pillar of fire by night? We do not know. It is what I call the key UFO of the Exodus, and we do not know what it is. It seems to be a cylindrical column that looks cloud-like during the day, and glows in the dark. Many modern UFOs look like this—they are called cloud-cigars. Some are reported to be a mile long, like the one seen in Texas last year. Some scholars have suggested the Exodus UFO might have been the smoke from a volcano. Immanuel Velikovsky, in his book *Worlds In Collision*, suggested it might have been the planet Venus making a near pass at planet earth.

But here is the failure of all these suggestions. The Bible says that Moses was in voice conversation with a being, an angel of God, in the Exodus UFO. A volcano would not talk to Moses. Venus would not talk to Moses. This UFO leads the Jews out of Egypt after Passover, and in my book I take about 20 pages to explain that this Exodus UFO may have used its propulsion system to part the waters of the Red Sea. This Exodus UFO seems to drop the Manna that feeds the Jews during their wilderness journey, it lands on Mt. Sinai, where Moses receives not only the commandments for the Jewish religion, but also instructions for building the Tabernacle, the tent of worship of the Jews, as well as the Ark of the Covenant. This wilderness journey is reported to last 40 years, during which the Jews learn. Learn what? They learn to be Jews, learn the faith we know as the Old Testament faith.

During this journey the Jews played follow the leader. The pillar of cloud and fire, the Exodus UFO was the leader. This is what we find in our Old Testament lesson from Numbers. "So it was continually; the cloud covered it by day, and the appearance of fire by night. And whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tent, after that the people of Israel set out; and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the people of Israel encamped." So this was the Exodus pattern. The Exodus UFO would move on, Israel would follow. The UFO would stop, Israel would stop, sometimes for days at a time, or a month. This is follow the leader, Old Testament style, and we still sing about it.

I love that old hymn, "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah." Here are some of the words: "Guide me, O thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land;...let the fire and cloud-y pillar lead me all my journey through."

Here is the basic Exodus witness. The Exodus happened because of the intervention of an extraterrestrial power. That power met Moses in a burning bush, caused the death of the first-born of Egypt, parted the Red Sea, gave Israel its commandments, its identity as chosen people, the people of God.

What are we to make of this witness? Notice how a modern scientist might see this. A modern scientist might say, "It looks like beings from another planet were carrying on some type of scientific experiment with the Jewish people."

How would a modern liberal theologian see this? I am not sure. Modern liberals do not take any of the Exodus literally—some do not even think Moses existed. So, they will not suddenly join in thinking that the Red Sea really parted.

How would modern conservative theologians see this? Some have said this ruins the whole thing. Other conservatives who think UFOs might be real think they are demonic. I have debated some of these conservatives. The debate is not over.

But this is the possibility I see. I think it is possible that the angels in the Bible have technology. We have never even talked about this before. If angels parted the Red Sea with advanced technology, is it still a miracle? I think you can see, this raises new tough questions, and so far, the church is not talking about it.

But notice this: the pillar of cloud and fire represented great power to the Jews, power to liberate them, feed them, discipline them, guide them, protect them. As the hymn says, "I am weak, but thou art mighty."

Now, let us jump to the New Testament. The Jews were waiting for a Messiah, a great leader who would reestablish the power of Moses, and of David. And what did they get? They got Jesus. There were hints of Divine power in Jesus—at his baptism, some type of UFO descended on Jesus like a dove, according to Mark's Gospel, as we heard in today's reading. Although UFOs show up in the New Testament, like the angel light over the shepherds at Christmas, or the bright cloud at the Transfiguration of Jesus (Mt. 17), or the "cloud" that carries Jesus up into the sky, like Elijah, at his ascension, mostly, we do not see extraterrestrial power in the

New Testament.

Not like the Exodus. Why? Now the power of God is in Jesus, not in the pillar of cloud and fire. In Jesus, the word has become flesh and walks among us. In a way, Jesus is a combination of Moses and the pillar of cloud and fire of the Exodus.

And what kind of power did Jesus show? He gave good sermons, he was a champion of the poor, the sick, the losers in life. He forgave sins. He healed the sick. But in the end of the day, he was crucified.

This is a shocking turn in direction from the Powerful Jehovah of the Exodus, the God of Passover, the God who parted the Red Sea.

Ahh, but God did raise Jesus from the dead. Yes—but even then people could not believe it. But when I come before you today, this is the Jesus I preach. In his name I say to you, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” The Biblical faith we hold began in power, but ends in a kind of weakness, at least weakness in the eyes of the world. For here you are, wondering, without proof, if I am right, wondering if modern UFOs might be the angels of God. If our Christian faith is true, notice what kind of God we have. We have a God who comes to us and says, “Follow me, follow me in love, follow me and you will be ridiculed for believing in me, follow me and minister to the poor, the oppressed, follow me and be called foolish by the wise in the world.”

The call of Jesus goes not just to Peter and Andrew, but to all of us. And this call is more important than our call to be fishermen, or teachers, or parents, or bus drivers, or pastors, although these are all tasks that have to be done. But the call of Jesus is about character building, about learning the basics of faith, hope and love, about faithfulness to God in an unfaithful world. Jesus calls all of us to play this childhood game we used to play, follow the leader. I believe UFOs are a sign to us that the game is still on, God is not dead, God’s angels are not dead. The faith of the church may be dead, but God is not dead. The God who raised Jesus is not dead. The call to follow Jesus is still loud and clear for those who have ears to hear. And I believe we are called to be filled with wonder, wonder about these strange things seen in our skies, things our government, just like Pharaoh, will not admit even exist. Amen.