

Sermon – “Calling and Sending”
Sunday, January 19, 2020
Scripture Readings: 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42
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The first reading today is the opening lines from Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth. Listen now for God’s Word in 1 Corinthians chapter 1, verses 1 through 9.

¹ Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,

² To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind — ⁶ just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you — ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸ He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

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Our second reading tells us of a moment at the beginning of Jesus’s adult ministry, when he is publicly announced at his encounter with John the Baptist. The day before this scene, John has announced that one greater than him was present among the people, but did not name him. In this passage, he openly declares who Jesus is. Hear now God’s Word in the Gospel of John, chapter 1, verses 29 through 42.

²⁹ The next day [John] saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ ³¹ I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” ³² And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³ I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ ³⁴ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

³⁵ The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶ and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” ³⁷ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸ When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?”

They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” ³⁹

He said to them, “Come and see.”

They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon. ⁴⁰ One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. ⁴¹ He first found his brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed). ⁴² He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter).

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Those of us who enjoy sports probably all tend toward different places on the field of play. Some with more speed and agility naturally become running backs. Others have size and fearlessness and play on the line. Some have the same fearlessness combined with an arm like a rifle and can play shortstop, or can judge fly balls and cover a lot of ground in the outfield. But there’s one position we all have played, and continue to play, despite a singular lack of success. Have you ever won a football game as an armchair quarterback?

I can say with certainty I have not. And I have tried many times.

The question extends well beyond athletics. The armchair anthropologist, the armchair general, the backseat driver, there are ways for anyone to participate in the sport of sitting comfortably where we are, out of the direct line of fire or pressure of decision-making, dreaming our way to understanding and imagining our way to success.

We are always of two minds about this approach. Often we make fun of it, or we frustratedly dismiss the self-proclaimed expertise of those who are quite sure of themselves in arenas where they have never risked anything nor found themselves on the spot, called upon to make decisions with real consequences.

At the same time, however, we make every effort to play this role ourselves whenever possible, for it is far easier and less scary to sit back, out of the fray, develop our opinions from afar, and judge things from where we sit, coffee in one hand, newspaper or smartphone in the other, and strong conviction in mind and heart.

Two disciples appear to have gotten pulled from their seats in today’s reading. John’s telling of the intersection of Jesus and John the Baptist is an interesting one. Most curiously, it never mentions John baptizing Jesus. It does, however, tell us that John recognized who Jesus was, by the sign of the Spirit descending and remaining on him, and that he proclaimed the presence of this one greater than himself to his own followers over a series of interactions spanning several days.¹

¹ John’s interactions with and proclamations of Jesus plays out over John 1:19-42, although the contiguous, day-after-day storyline goes on through John 2:12.

The first day, in the verses immediately prior to the ones we read today, John speaks to some who are questioning him about his own identity and purpose and declares, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.”²

The second day, as we just heard, “he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared: “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.”³

So the first day, he has announced the presence of Christ among them in the crowd but not named him. The second day, he has identified who it is, and explained the signs by which he came to know this. The third day, Jesus having come near again to where John was, as we heard just now, he watched Jesus walk by and exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God! The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.”⁴

This marks a noteworthy moment, in which John, whose purpose seems to be to make ready and announce the coming of the Lord, is in fulfillment of that purpose, handing his own disciples off to the greater one whose arrival he is there to herald. But their transition from followers of John to followers of Jesus is interesting. What does Jesus say to them when he sees them following him?

“What are you looking for?” he demands.⁵

I always identify and empathize with the disciples here. I wonder if any of us would have a good answer to give if we met Jesus and he asked us the same. “What are you looking for?” It is a question that is also a challenge. Do you know what you are looking for? What do you think it is that you will find in following this man? And perhaps Jesus does still ask this question of us, as well.

These two do not, I think, know the answer any better than we would. “Rabbi,” they say, “where are you staying?”⁶

One wonders how to read their response. Are they flummoxed, not sure what they are looking for, and settle on the first socially acceptable answer they can think of, asking their own question in response?

I think there may be some of that element to it, but here’s what I also think. The two of them have been listening to the teachings of John, whom they apparently consider to be their leader and teacher, a great rabbi to them. And John has just said this man walking past is far greater than he. If your favorite professor of all time, one of the sort where you sign up for classes you otherwise would not have interest in just because he or she is teaching them, were to

² See John 1:19-28. The quote is from John 1:26-27 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

³ John 1:29-31 (*NRSV*).

⁴ From John 1:36 (*NRSV*).

⁵ From John 1:38 (*NRSV*).

⁶ Also from John 1:38 (*NRSV*).

have declared that some gentleman standing nearby was *the* great professor of all time, and a whole lot more than that, you might well think it well worth your time to go see if you can get in on one of that guy's classes as well. "Where are you staying?" they ask. *Where can we find you and sit at your feet to learn, as well?* And Jesus offers them a chance to do so— but the words with which he does so turn out to have far greater import to them than simply answering their question would have.

"Come and see," he says.⁷ He does not tell them the answer; he does not give them mere information; he gives them an invitation and a call. "Come and see." With these words Jesus foresees and hints at a future for how they will truly find what they are looking for.

They may have envisioned sitting and hearing, learning from a wise master, but already the language is of something different, of forward movement and action, of something more like apprenticeship than classroom teaching. "Come and see." This is a phrasing of learning through motion, of gaining wisdom by living in a direction. Only through coming with him will they see.

They will learn that being a disciple of Jesus Christ is not an armchair endeavor. There is no sitting back and theorizing your way along. It is a path of motion, of getting up and following. We all have likely struggled with the question of what God calls us to. Where are we meant to go in life? Does God have purpose or direction for us? Are we to become this, or that? Shall we do one thing, or another? And except in cases where it is clear to us that one thing is wrong and another right, we usually feel a good deal less ability to sort it all out than we would like. We do not usually seem to have a map given to us, with "you are here" written near a red dot, and a big 'X' marking the spot where we are meant to arrive.

More often, we seem to be given a part like that of these two disciples. They came ultimately to find a whole lot more than they remotely could have imagined or understood at this moment had it been spoken to them in words, but they only were able to find what they were looking for by physically going on a journey. Or consider the experience of the wise men, who did not know where they were going, but had to simply keep following the star and see where it brought them.

I have heard it pointed out that you can't steer a boat that isn't moving. This has matched some of my own experience with trying to know my own calling from Christ, seeking to understand where he might be sending me. I can sit in my armchair for all of eternity, pondering that question, and even praying over it. And there is certainly wisdom and renewal in reflection and prayer, and a necessity no less important than stopping to fuel an automobile. But the true steering seems to happen only on the road, when we have set ourselves on a path that is the right direction today, so far as we can see with the light we have been given up to now, and keep ourselves open to the direction and redirection of God speaking into our weak but real attempts at faithfulness.

⁷ From John 1:39 (NRSV).

Maybe there is even a parallel in today's technology. Perhaps you've asked your phone or GPS device for directions while sitting in a parking lot, only to discover that the first direction you get from it is something like, "Please proceed to the route." "Where is the route?" you'd like to ask? "Onto which street should I exit, and do I turn left or right?" You have only a vague notion of which way you are meant to proceed. You thus have no choice but to begin to proceed according to your best understanding, and it is only when you are in motion that you will be steered— if you continue to listen— in the right direction.

We heard similar-sounding words from Paul in our first reading, as well. "[I]n every way you have been enriched in [Christ Jesus], in speech and knowledge of every kind...so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ."⁸ There, too, is a kind of waiting for something that will be revealed further later on, but the expectation is that we are to exercise our every gift along the way, on an active path through life in the meantime.

So let us go ahead. Here is a new year; it is a good chance to step out in a direction you have long sensed you ought to move in as a part of being faithful. It might be one of study and learning, as it was at first for the disciples, or one of relationships, or one of vocation, or development of your own character. Maybe you just know that if you really paid attention to your Christian beliefs, you'd start doing, or stop doing...well, only you know. I only can tell you that you should not be afraid of the fact that you cannot map out what the end state is of your life. If you cannot write a systematic, theologically thorough analysis of what your calling is in life, but you can say you're pretty sure Jesus would have you work on how you treat your husband or wife or friends, or would have you let go of some problematic attachment you have to something, or take up praying or volunteering or providing something really needed by someone you know, or whatever else God has put on your heart with a sense of conviction today, then start there.

Even the people we look up to as great leaders of the faith did not get the full picture all at once. Do you think the man whose life our nation remembers tomorrow, Martin Luther King, Jr., started out being told by God: "Be a great civil rights leader"? I suspect it sounded more like, "There is an injustice in front of you today. Take that one up today, and tomorrow I will give you tomorrow's work." And even the apostles themselves, as we heard today, only got "Come and see."

What is God's plan for you? Well, that's both easy, and hard, right? Salvation is God's plan for you! But "salvation" is a hefty word, and it isn't a thing we understand from where we are today. It isn't something we live toward as armchair Christians. You have to get underway; "proceed to route." Or, in the words of the Epistle to the Philippians, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure."⁹ What does it mean for us to follow Jesus? I guess we have to "come and see." May God indeed enable us to will and to work all along that journey. Amen.

⁸ From 1 Corinthians 1:5-7 (NRSV).

⁹ Philippians 2:12b-13 (NRSV).