

The Call of God: The Third Sunday of Epiphany

What do you think it would have been like to encounter the Apostle Paul before he met Jesus on the Damascus Road? What do we know about him? He was a Jewish man who trained as a Pharisee. He was a zealous student of the Scriptures and a defender of the established religious order. We have to take his word for it, but he said that he had advanced beyond his peers and was respected by the rulers of the Pharisees and temple. We know that Paul was such a zealous defender of the established religious order that he condoned the stoning to death of Stephen and had letters of authority to arrest Christians in Damascus. I think it is safe to say as a Christian, we would not have been interested in spending any time with him. After all, Paul himself said that he was breathing out threats against Christians. With all that in mind, imagine that you have the chance to sit down with him over a coffee and chat. Remember, he was a devoted student of the Bible. Moreover, he would have been full of energy and passion. Normally, when we encounter people like that, we feed off their excitement. On the other hand, the driving force of his passion was overtly negative. His goal was to root out any Christians he could find and take them back to Jerusalem to stand trial before the Sanhedrin. Perhaps the thing that would have stood out about him was his deep abiding sense of mission. He had an unwavering belief in what he was doing—until he didn't. All the confidence and self-belief crumbled away when a bright light shone from heaven and a voice crying out to him said, "Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me?"

The man that we know as St. Paul or the Apostle Paul was confronted on the road to Damascus by something so great—something so startling—that he could not go back to a way of life that had offered him his purpose and his guiding principles. The One who confronted him was so overwhelmingly glorious that he not only could not go back to his old life, but he would spend the rest of his life telling the world all about Jesus Christ. St. Paul would go on to give his testimony of God's grace before synagogues, rich merchants, jailers, Roman officials, Jewish leaders, kings, and even before Caesar. The ministry that St Paul had among the Gentiles across the Roman empire has been the diligent study of bishops, pastors, church planters, and missionaries ever since. While it is true that people have studied St. Paul's methods and theology, he would have told us that we were wasting our time trying to figure out what made him tick. You see, he told us what drove him. After St. Paul met Jesus on the Damascus Road, the one thing that drove him was the cross of Christ. For St. Paul, the cross of Christ was the central, pivotal moment in the unfolding plan of God to redeem sinful humanity from the death-grip of the Law. Behind the theological precision and the keen pastoral insights, St. Paul only had this one simple message—everything that truly matters is found in Jesus.

At the beginning of Matthew 4, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness after his baptism. Jesus' time in the wilderness was spent in prayer and fasting. For forty days, Jesus endured a wilderness existence as severe as the people of Israel did in their forty years of wilderness wandering. At the end of the forty days of fasting, Jesus was tempted by Satan. Satan appealed to Jesus through his appetite, approval, and ambition. After Jesus resisted the devil's attempts to get him to fall into sin, he re-entered Judea. However, while he was in the wilderness, John the Baptist had been

arrested for preaching against Herod's sinful relationships. The crowds that had been flocking to see John had all gone back home, so Jesus went to where the people were.

In the gospel reading for this morning, we read about Jesus starting his public ministry and calling his first disciples. His message is strikingly simple. He is announcing that the Kingdom of Heaven has come to the earth. The kingdom that has long been foretold and predicted by the Old Testament prophets and lately by John the Baptist is no longer some future event—Jesus Christ the Lord of glory himself has come. The people who hear this announcement are prompted to repent and come into the kingdom. The text says that they were a people dwelling in the shadow of death, but that the dawn of gospel light has come upon them.

Jesus came preaching the Kingdom of God with himself as the central figure in it. He is the Son of God who came down from heaven to bring the light of life to those dwelling in darkness. Jesus' preaching was aimed at gathering people into his Kingdom. His message was repent, or turn around, and come into the Kingdom. As a preacher, Jesus declared the Kingdom, but he did not wait on the response of the fickle crowds. In Matthew 4:18-22, the call that Jesus issued to Peter, Andrew, James, and John was simple—“follow me.” The second half of his call to Peter and Andrew gets a lot of attention. However, the focus is not on what the disciples will become. The focus of the passage is on the call and the one who calls the disciples. When we respond to the call of Christ, we are not being called to a perfectly defined task—we are being called to follow him. To understand the call of Christ better let's examine Matthew 4:18-22 by looking at the Call that Jesus issues to the disciples and the One who calls them.

As I said before, this passage of Scripture is well known because of the second part of Jesus' words to Andrew and Peter, where he says that he will make them fishers of men. Jesus is using the situation to communicate with Simon Peter and Andrew. The play on words shows us that Jesus had a purpose for calling these men to leave their nets. As rough Galilean fisherman, they knew how to read the tides, find the best fishing spots, and how to get the best price for their catch. These skills were going to be exchanged for pastoral compassion, theological depth, and zeal to make Christ known to the people around them. Here is the catch though, Jesus' call to Peter and Andrew was not to be fishers of men. To be clear, one of the things Jesus was going to do in their lives was make them fishers of men. Simon Peter and Andrew were going to go out into the darkness with the gospel light and compel people to come into the Kingdom—just like Jesus was doing with them. However, Jesus' call to them was not based on them accomplishing a special preordained task or getting lots of new followers for Jesus.

His call was far simpler than that—Jesus' actual command or call to the Andrew and Peter was “follow me.” If we look at the grammatical construction of the sentence, then the point comes into further focus. The first part of Jesus words is a command or call. The second part is what Jesus will do in and through them. They are not being called to be fishers of men. They are being called to follow Jesus. The transformation into fishers of men comes because of following Jesus. We must be clear then. The emphasis is not on what Jesus might lead the disciples to do, but that they were to follow wherever he leads.

When Jesus talks about discipleship in the gospels, he does not say some of you will be pastors, some evangelists, some missionaries, and so forth. The call that he issued was to follow him. Jesus himself nuanced the call to follow him with phrases like “take up your cross,” “whoever would save his life will lose it,” and “whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.” These phrases show the cost of following Jesus. The cost seems to be quite high, but how high is the cost? As you know there are many religions that ask people to earn their salvation through good deeds. The list of deeds may be extensive or simple, but either way the list must be worked through in order to gain a

reward in the afterlife. The cost of salvation for the Christian is an entire life sacrificed to God. Rather than seeing the bar for these other religions as too high, we have to say that their bar is just too low. A few good deeds or giving money is nothing to one's entire life. However, it would be good for us to remember that our sinful lives cannot save anyone, not even our own life. We cannot exchange our lives for eternal salvation because our sins are what is condemning us. However, there is one person who not only can exchange his life for the world, but he already has. Our Lord Jesus has done for us what we could never do for ourselves—he died to satisfy God's perfect standard of righteousness. He died to set us apart as God's own possession, his holy people.

The great division of people in the world is no longer based on where they were born, language, or economic status. The world is divided along the lines of who is a follower of Jesus or not. Jesus' perfect sacrifice for our sins, his glorious resurrection and ascension, have brought us back to life, so we can follow him. So, when Jesus says to us "follow me," he is not calling us to a list of good deeds to accomplish to earn a place in the kingdom that he came announcing. He is calling us to walk with him and in him to the cross where he will lay down his life for us.

Therefore, we can say that the call of Jesus is not "easy," but it is simple—follow Jesus, wherever he leads. What I am suggesting to you about the call of Jesus might be different from what you have thought of as the call that God has placed on your life. We have all prayed and asked God to show us the path he wants us to go down in life. We have prayed to ask for help with decisions like what job should we pursue, who should we marry, where should we live, and so on. So, how do we know what God is calling us to do with our lives? The first thing to note in any discussion about our calling in life is that God's perfect plan is often a mystery to us until we can look back at our lives. Often the best thing to do is read our Bibles, pray, and serve in whatever ways the Lord provides for us. As we are serving the Lord, we should not be surprised when the Lord clears the path for us as we go.

More importantly, we can say that the calling of our lives is not about the road or paths that he leads us down. The call to follow Jesus is all about the One who calls us in the first place. Our object is not to find purpose on the path down which he leads us. Look again at what Jesus said to Peter and Andrew (Matt 4:19). He said, "follow ME." The very Son of God is calling them to follow HIM. Jesus is making himself the object of pursuit. Peter and Andrew and James and John were adults with families that relied on them. They would not have traded the stability that their family businesses afforded them to search for meaning in a religious profession. If they had been the kind of people who were destined for a position with the Pharisees that would have already happened. Indeed, their settled and normal lives were interrupted by the call to follow Jesus. We would do well to remind ourselves that Jesus had already met these men a day or so after his baptism. Andrew and Peter had gone to John to be baptized, and Andrew was listening to John teach about the coming Messiah, when Jesus walked by. John's declaration that Jesus was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world led to Andrew leaving John and following Jesus. Andrew told Peter about John's words, and they both went to meet with Jesus. When Jesus met with them, he called Simon "Peter" for the first time. Shortly after his baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness for a time of fasting and prayer. Upon returning to Judea, Jesus learned of John the Baptist's arrest. The arrest of John the Baptist dispersed the crowds back to their homes and led Jesus to go back to Galilee. The light of the gospel was going to dawn in Galilee. That light that was dawning was Jesus himself. So, when Jesus walks up to Simon Peter and Andrew and calls them to follow him, they are not unaware who he is or what he is. Their commitment to leave everything behind makes sense because they know him—as the miracle working, Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. They hear the call of the beloved Son of God, and they leave their nets and follow Jesus.

Like these early disciples, we are being called to follow Jesus. Trying to find out the details of the path that he might lead us down is as difficult for us as it was for Simon Peter and Andrew. However, what is easy is knowing who it is that we are following. He came as flesh and blood, eating and drinking, and telling the world who he is. He revealed himself through authoritative preaching and displays of God's power that no one else could have done. He is so gentle that he does not break the bruised reed or snuff out the faintly burning wick. Yet he is the cornerstone of reality and truth itself. If you stumble on him, it will shatter you. He binds up the brokenhearted and blesses the poor and needy. He resists the proud and will judge all things down to the thoughts and intentions of our sinful hearts. Jesus is the Lord of glory and the whole world will bow their knee to him. He is the King of Kings who left his throne to die in our place, so that he could bring us to his Father.

The call that Simon Peter and Andrew heard that day was to follow Jesus. When compared with anything else, Jesus is simply better. With him as the object of our devotion and love, we cannot imagine anything higher or better. The call then is to give ourselves to Jesus, which might sound like a dangerous thing. After all, wouldn't we lose control of our own lives? The short answer to that question is, "when did you ever have control of your life?" Think back to the life of St. Paul. He had an absolute confidence that he was on the right path in life when he was persecuting Christians. Every decision he made in life was applauded by the people that he believed he should honor. So, whether he was looking for validation from within his own heart or from other people, he would have been able to say he was doing just what he was supposed to be doing. That is, until he met Jesus. When Jesus crashed into his life, St. Paul was undone. All his plans for his life were turned upside down. The truth is that we cannot control our lives. The company we work for could move us to a new place. It could close. A storm could sweep through and ruin our homes. A sudden sickness could take vital years of our lives. You might find a new passion that sends you off in a new direction.

The call of Jesus is to follow him through all of life's ups and down. Simon Peter and Andrew both were killed for their faith in Jesus. Peter was even crucified upside down. Their deaths are not a sign that they wasted their lives, because they gave up the very thing that they never had control over to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

What do we do now? The call is the same today as it was 2000 years ago—follow Jesus. Following Jesus might lead you in ways that you never could have imagined—and he very likely already has. You are here in this place this morning because the Lord Jesus has brought you here. What work will he do in your life? We cannot say for sure, but there are two things that we can know for certain.

First, Jesus will not lead us to a place that he has not already gone. Think about what it means to be a follower of Jesus—for us to follow him, he must go ahead of us. Jesus told his disciples that he was going to the cross. He told the disciples to take up their cross. We enter the Christian life through Jesus, and he calls us to walk with him through life. He might lead us into all sorts of paths, but as he promised in Matthew 28:20, he will be with us to the end of the world. He never leaves us or forsakes us. He is our true older brother who lays down his own life to save us. We can trust that no matter what the path may be, he is leading us somewhere good.

The second confidence that we can have is that the destination that Jesus is leading us to is a place that we want to be. We do not have to worry about the path he leads us down. We are called to follow him, and we know where he is leading us—in paths of righteousness to the New Heavens and the New Earth where he will be our God, we will be his people, and we will dwell with him

forever. With our destination secure, we can trust that our Lord Jesus will take care to bring us through this life wherever it may lead us as we follow him.

May the Lord Jesus himself guard our lives and strengthen our resolve to follow him.

Let us pray.

Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.