

The Call of a Lifetime

(John 1:43-51)

Sermon delivered by The Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
The Second Sunday after the Epiphany, January 14, 2017

In the name of one God – creator, redeemer and sustainer. Amen.

One of the most fascinating things about the Gospel reading we have just heard is that it marks a **moment of intersection**. In the past several weeks, on the Fourth Sunday of Advent and the First Sunday After Christmas, we read the Prologue, the summary of the pre-existence of the eternal Word and the time when that Word became incarnate.

And while in this Epiphany season we are reading Mark's Gospel, if we continued with the next 11 chapters of John we would read what is known collectively as "The Book of Signs" – the portion of the Gospel that covers the public ministry of Jesus and the signs he showed to those gathered around him. From the miracle of turning water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana to through the feeding miracles and moments of healing, these chapters cover the time that the disciples spent traveling with Jesus.

But today, in this reading, we find ourselves at the moment when the past incarnation of the Word and the soon-to-begin future of Jesus' ministry meet. And they do so in an instant that marks the beginning of discipleship. They meet in a moment of **call**.

But is a call something that comes in a single moment of recognition? Or is there much more to it?

When I was in seminary and as part of the ordination process, one of the things I was asked to do was to write and present what is known as a call narrative. Using my entrance into VTS as the conclusion of the story, I was asked to look back and trace the course of my life, identifying key moments in my journey. It's an interesting thing to do, to sit and reflect on the major events and people that collectively form a life story. And it's even more interesting – more emotional – to discover that all of the seemingly disparate parts of a life are actually pieces woven together as a whole by the thread of the Holy Spirit.

As I reflected, I discovered that incidents in my life or people who I met that seemingly had no relation to one another were very much related. No, the relationships weren't necessarily ones of kinship or of even shared experiences or shared times in my life. But they were very much related to the call that even then was being extended to me. By the time I had completed this assignment – one that we were asked to look at and revise through the three years of seminary – I learned something important.

The call that I thought I was hearing the first time I felt the taps on my shoulders was actually a call that extended back to the **beginning of my life**. From the moment I was born, God was

calling. And that is true for each of us; no matter how differently we may perceive God at work in our lives or feel the Holy Spirit summoning us, the call is there – and always has been.

Today, we read of Jesus going to Galilee and finding two of his disciples, Philip and Nathanael. Think about that: they didn't go to seek out Jesus; Jesus sought **them** out and came **to them**. It was a choice he made; in verse 43, "Jesus **decided** to go to Galilee." He could have gone anywhere and sought out anyone – but Philip and Nathanael, like all the others who were chosen to follow Jesus, had **already** been called. This moment was the culmination of the journeys they began at birth; this moment was the beginning of their **discipleship**.

I'm particularly struck by the fact that while Jesus walked up to Philip, he **saw** Nathanael sitting alone under a fig tree. In a 1977 sermon on this passage, the martyred El Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero wrote, "What was Nathanael doing under the fig tree? No one knows, but it must have been something that was to be kept a secret. He was perhaps thinking or meditating on things that only he knew."¹ But it's a point that's not even mentioned until later, after Philip has gone to bring Nathanael to introduce him to Jesus. And it's an important point: Nathanael was already seen – already **known** – before Jesus ever said anything to him.

Nathanael also contributes another important moment to this passage; when he learns that Jesus is from Nazareth – a backwater town not known for anyone or anything – he asks, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" To me, that's a question that can be expanded, a question of whether anything good can come not just from a particular place but also from a particular life.

The answer is yes. The disciples would certainly learn that something truly good did indeed come from Nazareth. But beyond that, God – the perfect God – has spent all of recorded history calling imperfect people. You could pretty much take a Bible and open it up to any point, and you're going to find the calling of imperfect people to serve the perfect God. It's proof that anything good **can** be from any place ... and any life. Sometimes the greatest things come from the most humble or unexpected beginnings.

All of us, you and I – just as countless generations were before us, even the disciples whom Jesus called to join him – are imperfect people. We make mistakes; we experience tragedy and loss; we get tired and frustrated. We get wearied by life. The things that may have been experienced in our lives – loss, painful relationships, family difficulties – may seem to be nothing more than baggage to be carried or emotional wreckage to be cast aside. But there's good news.

Baggage can be unpacked. Wreckage can be repurposed. Ruins can be rebuilt. New lives can rise on top of the old. And all that we may have experienced – the struggles that we may go through, the ruins of what might have been – are in fact be the exact building blocks needed to create something new.

¹ Archbishop Oscar Romero, A Prophetic Bishop Speaks to His People, Vol. I, p. 339.

We have all been called. When I finally heard God's call, God wasn't just asking for my life from the moment I heard that summons moving forward; God was asking me to bring everything with me. My call began on day one, even ***before*** day one, and I was asked to build on all of my life's experiences.

And the same is true for each of you. God is calling to you. God has been calling you all your lives. God sees you sitting under your own fig trees, alone with your thoughts. God is calling the good in you. The answer to Nathanael's question was a resounding "Yes!" Something good came from Nazareth, in the form of Jesus. And something good has come from each of your homes and each of your towns. Something very good.

And it is something very deserving of God's call to you. It is the call of a lifetime.

Amen.