

Follow Me

Proper 5A; June 11, 2023

Genesis 12:1-9, Psalm 33:1-12; Romans 4:13-25; Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

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In the name of our God who is Life Abundant, Love Overflowing, and Spirit Outpouring, Amen.

We are prepared, as a community, for today's readings to transform us. Three weeks ago, between the feasts of Ascension and Pentecost, we were longing for the Holy Spirit to come and to guide us to a life of discipleship where we share the Good News of the Gospel with all people and in every place. Fresh from our Eastertide readings in the book of Acts, we put our confidence in these words of Jesus: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Last week, we wondered together about how God makes God's Self known to us as the three persons of the Trinity- that as we

pay attention to the abundance of ways where God is showing up and at work in the world right now we find ourselves each uniquely called to follow where God invites us, to be faithful to both familiar and new ways of loving and serving.

Today, we hear a story of invitation that is both simple and incredibly powerful- that of Jesus calling Matthew, saying “Follow me”, and Matthew getting up and following Jesus. It is possible- although scholars are divided over this- that this story is actually Matthew recording his own conversion experience in the Gospel that bears his name; whether it is or not, for those of us in this parish church called St. Matthew’s it is a story with particular meaning for us. In the Collect for St. Matthew’s Day- observed on September 21st- we pray ***“that, after the example of Matthew, we may with ready wills and hearts obey the calling of our Lord to follow him.”***

Much has been made of Matthew's shameful status as a tax collector and what it meant for Jesus to choose him. Stationed at his tax collection booth, Matthew had the perfect setup to waylay everyone who passed along the road, extorting money for fishing licenses and traveling taxes and lots of other things- a kind of local mafia. These taxes were not well regulated- once the Roman Empire had been paid its due the tax collectors could keep any extra money they were able to get and they were known for taking advantage of this. They generally operated within their own home communities but they were shunned from everyday life for their relationship with the despised foreign conquerors who had put their own people into bondage, considered unclean and unable to even enter the synagogue. Because of all this, Matthew is an unlikely candidate to become a follower of Jesus- at least in the eyes of the Pharisees who love to show up and complain "Why does your teacher eat with those tax collectors and sinners?" This is historical

context that really matters- I know none of us are ever delighted about paying our taxes, but it is not at all the same kind of situation and so the full impact of Jesus' choosing Matthew to follow him could easily be lost on us.

But I personally think the most amazing thing about this story is that Matthew **gets up**, leaving behind his tax collector's booth, leaving behind both this despised way of living and the earthly wealth that is part of it **to follow Jesus**. It is as true for us as for the people whose stories we hear in scripture: *God never calls us to something, towards something- without calling us away from something that we must leave behind if we are to be faithful to the call.* In today's reading from Genesis, God says to Abram (not yet re-named Abraham) to "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you...I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, so that you will be a

blessing.” To follow God’s call, Abram must leave both people and places he loves behind and journey onwards into a future he cannot yet see, believing that God’s promises to him are real and true and that the fullness of these promises- their blessings and their hope- will be worth the cost. *Beloveds, getting up and following when God calls means we must accept that there will be both uncertainty and the nearness of God’s presence on the road as it unfolds before us- it is a really thin space, one where we must hold fast to our belief that what lies ahead is what God most longs for us to know, to become.*

It is absolutely essential to notice that God chooses Abram, that Jesus chooses Matthew- *not the other way around*. Whether there is ever actually a choice on our part or not is anybody’s guess- I believe it is always a little beyond our control, at least if we are to be faithful in how we respond when we hear God calling us. We human beings hate to think that we do not have control,

especially when it comes to our decision making- and sometimes there really are decisions that we need to make. There is a danger in these call stories of scripture that we could think if we do not get up and follow right away when God calls that we are somehow not as true or faithful as they were. For example, if we are the only person providing food and shelter and health benefits for our families, we may not be able to walk away from a job even if that job is not life giving in any way, or pick up and move even if we know we need a different living situation, or immediately go back to school. But we **can** pay attention to how something has shifted inside of us and we can begin to figure out what that might be. A seed is planted in these moments that grows unseen by anyone except the One who created us until suddenly it catches everyone- including ourselves- by surprise as it bursts into new growth and bright promise. Who knows how long Matthew was watching and observing Jesus from the ugliness- from the loneliness- of his old way of being

until he was ready for Jesus' invitation when it came- that maybe he was "hoping against hope", as our reading from Romans says, that what was ahead was richer and fuller than anything he would leave behind? Our faithfulness is found in all the steps we take and how we are transformed as we go, not in a specific end goal or destination: this is something my own journey towards ordination made certain that I learned, or I would have missed all the moments of blessing and new life where God was so fully present to me along the way.

Whatever it means to each of us-and it will indeed look very different- God's call of "Follow me" will always find us, tapping us on the shoulder when we least expect it, showing up in our dreams, nagging us and wearing down our defenses until we are exposed and vulnerable to the truth about ourselves God wants us to see. Sometimes we get up and follow when we hear God call us, like Matthew, or Abram "who went as the Lord

had told him.” Sometimes we argue with God, like Moses; or hide from God, like Jonah, or try to get out of it by saying we are not worthy, like Jeremiah who cried out: “Oh, Lord God! I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy!” *But we cannot grow towards whom we have been created to be if we do not listen for what places of new life are beckoning us forward- for what we must leave behind- if we do not believe that God will provide everything we will need as we journey onwards.* It is never easy to put your feet on a road where the twists and turns and where we will end up is unknown to us.

Speaking only for myself, I was faithful to the command “Follow me” long before- years before- I had any idea what it truly meant- I only knew that I had heard God promise me if I would travel onwards I would discover my calling- and I have- here we are, together. I really believe- because I have seen it with my eyes- that in the beginning our faithfulness to the journey is all that we can claim, and it is only through our willingness to follow that

all will be revealed to us. We can only become something new when we release our old ways of being, although that always means not quite knowing who we are in between, putting all our reliance on God's steadfast mercy and love, being fully convinced, as the apostle Paul says, *that God is able to do what God has promised*. The journey is real and the call to follow God is real and the presence of God with us- a God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not yet exist- is the truest thing we will ever know. *Amen*.