

**Sermon for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany
January 26, 2020**

The Holy Eucharist

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year A: Amos 3:1–8; Psalm 139:1–9; 1 Corinthians 1:10–17; Matthew 4:12–25**

Jesus is still in the wilderness, where the devil had tempted him, when he learns that John the Baptist has been arrested. So he leaves the wilderness and returns to Galilee, where he had grown up in Nazareth. The Greek verb here translated as “arrested” can also be a gentle one, meaning “give, deliver, entrust.”¹ But in a judicial context it means “handed over to the authorities.”² It’s the word behind our English translations of what Judas Iscariot did—he betrayed Jesus.³ It’s the word used when the chief priests and the elders decide to send him to Pilate.⁴ If I’ve counted correctly, it’s used 31 times in Matthew and always carries a sense that something is wrong, dangerous. As I often am, I gained this insight from Dr. Mark Davis’ scripture blog, “Left Behind and Loving It.”⁵

¹ *A Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (BDAG) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), *s.v.* “*παράδιδωμι*,” 761–623.

² *Ibid.*

³ Matthew 10:4.

⁴ Matthew 27:2.

⁵ <https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/01/the-reason-of-following.html>, (accessed 25 January 2020).

Dr. Davis also draws attention to another verb Matthew uses here, “withdraw”—or take refuge.⁶ Matthew uses it ten times (again if I have counted correctly) when danger approaches Jesus. The peace that Jesus has known since returning as child from Egypt is over. He has faced the devil. Ahead of him is the journey of teaching and healing that will bring him to Jerusalem. With this sentence, with these verbs, Matthew sets the stage for the rest of the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee and the stories that follow of the Good News of the kingdom of heaven.

Last Sunday our gospel lesson was from John. Today, of course, it’s from Matthew. In both lessons, Jesus calls the first of his disciples to follow him. The shape of the calls is very different. This is how it happened in the first chapter of the fourth gospel.

In John, two of the Baptist’s disciples,⁷ on successive days, hear the Baptist point out the Lamb of God, the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.⁸ These two, on their own initiative, begin to follow Jesus. John the evangelists writes, “Jesus turned, and saw them

⁶ BDAG, *s.v.* “ἀναχωρέω,” 75.

⁷ For preaching this sermon, I refer to John the Baptist as “the Baptist” to distinguish him from John the evangelist, who refers to the Baptist only by his first name.

⁸ John 1:29–36.

following, and said to them, ‘What do you seek?’ And they said to him . . . ‘where are you staying?’ He said to them, ‘Come and see.’ ”⁹

This is the late Raymond Brown’s translation of what happens next, “One of the two who had followed [Jesus], after hearing John [the Baptist], was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. The first thing he did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, ‘We have found the Messiah!’ . . . [Andrew] brought him to Jesus who looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon, son of John; your name shall be Cephas’ ”¹⁰—Peter. Daniel Harrington, in his commentary on Matthew, wrote that in Jesus’ time, seeking out a teacher was the way students found their rabbi.¹¹ For the record, in John’s gospel no one is fishing or goes fishing until after the resurrection.¹² But as we heard in Matthew, as it is in Mark and Luke, the initiative was not with the student but with the rabbi, Jesus.¹³

⁹ John 1:38–39.

¹⁰ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Anchor Bible 29, 29A (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966, 1970), I:73.

¹¹ Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007), 75.

¹² John 21:1–14.

¹³ Mark 1:16–20; Luke 5:1–11.

The discussion of the nature of Jesus' call to people—women and men—to follow him is a very large subject. For Christians, call and response between God and people is about the relationship of Creator to creature, creature to Creator. It's a fundamental theme of the Hebrew scriptures; it's a fundamental theme of the New Testament. For us believers, the story of our lives is the story of God's journey with us, of our journey with God. As God's call unfolded in the lives of Simon, Andrew, James, and John, so God's call to us unfolds in our lives.

As Matthew's story of Jesus' ministry begins, Jesus has a message: the sovereign reign of heaven has drawn near.¹⁴ Jesus has a ministry of healing. He's on a journey so that many people can hear and see that the reign of heaven has come near. Today's gospel lesson ends with more than four men following Jesus. Crowds of people are coming to him. Their presence will lead to the next story. Jesus will climb a mountain and begin to teach, "Happy are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them"¹⁵—it's the gospel for next Sunday. What those who hear Jesus speak, or who hear

¹⁴ Matthew 4:17.

¹⁵ Matthew 5:3.

the words of the gospel, do is a choice that Jesus leaves to each person.

In all four gospels, followers are called *mathētai*—students, learners. (Our English word “disciple” is from the Latin for “student.”) In the Southern Baptist tradition in which I grew up, “disciple” was a word that was used of people who are regular, ordinary practicing Christians. As an Episcopalian, I think it’s fair to say, we generally use the word as Mark, Matthew, and Luke use it: to identify the twelve apostles. John refers only twice to the twelve—and unlike the other gospels, he does not give us their names and does not identify them by calling them by the title “apostles.”

Yesterday was the feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul the Apostle. Paul’s letters are the oldest texts in the New Testament. The gospel narratives, of course, are later and go through stages of development over time. The words and the shape of the gospels and the other writings in the New Testament, we believe, are inspired by the Holy Spirit. If I may speak for all of us, we believe God’s Word, God’s Christ, has called each of us

to faith in God's love and God's place for us in the kingdom of heaven, in the life of the world to come.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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