

Two Questions

The lectionary readings for this week seem to be about God's call and claim on those chosen by God to serve God's purpose. The epistle reading of 1st Corinthians 1 begins: Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ, Jesus by the will of God is the opening salutation of this letter to the church in Corinth. This passage lifts up God's faithfulness and grace to those whom God has called into the fellowship found in the community of believers; those who have become followers of Jesus Christ. The Hebrew Scripture text from Isaiah is an imperative reminder by the prophet to the people that they were chosen by God long ago, even before they were a nation. Isaiah 49: 1's imperative call to the people for them to listen begins with the statement: "The Lord called me before I was born, before I was in my mother's womb, he named me." In this passage, Isaiah is referring to the nation of Israel and God's choosing of them for a particular purpose—and that purpose is to serve the Lord." But the passage also contains the prophet's deep discouragement about the peoples' failures as this servant of the Lord which has led to their long exile. Yet the prophet records God's reassurances: "And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant,...I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." It is not clear from the text, just who was the particular "servant" sent to bring Israel back to the Lord at the time this scroll was composed; the "servant" that is the subject of the text is Israel itself. Israel, as from the call made in the promise to Abram that through him all nations would be blessed, has been chosen to be a servant and a means for God to act in history and in the whole of creation. Any texts which lift up the theme of call and claim have within them this underlying understanding about God--- God is faithful and persistent in making this claim upon the lives of people. When we were reading the text from John's narrative this morning if you were following along in your Pew Bible, you might have noticed the inserted subtitles for the reading. There were two, and the second one seems to fit nicely with this focus about God's call as it reads "*Jesus' First Disciples.*" I have a commentary on the gospel of John which is titled John: The Maverick Gospel.¹ John's gospel describes events which appear in no other gospel. It also describes some events in a completely different manner, like the calling of the first disciples which occurs in this morning's text. It is when we encounter texts like these that we understand how different this account of Jesus' life is. This is especially true, not only about that calling of disciples but also in this description centering around the time of Jesus' baptism—for just before this morning's text John the Baptist upon being questioned about his identity denies being the Christ, being Elijah or even being a prophet. He claims the role given to him in the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke of being the one who has been sent to prepare the way for the Christ—even to using the words from Isaiah that we are familiar with from those gospel accounts. He is at the Jordan baptizing with water, but no where in John are we told that John baptizes Jesus. The passage which I read begins "The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'" The arrangement of these passages seems to indicate that this is the next day after John declared who he wasn't, or

¹ Kysar, Robert, John, the Maverick Gospel. 3rd. John Knox Press Louisville, KY, 2007

perhaps it is an indication that it is the day after Jesus was baptized without specifically recording it. In John's gospel, the divinity of Jesus is much more pronounced and the baptism which John the Baptist gave for repentance for the forgiveness of sin would have been an issue for his theological understanding of Christ. For whatever reason, what we do have in John's gospel is his testimony to the seeing of the Spirit coming down from heaven as a dove and remaining on Jesus. John the Baptist's testimony is this: "I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God." So in this opening passage this morning when placed in the context of John's narrative we can see that John the Baptist clearly understood his role—he was to alert people that God was soon to send the promised one and when that individual was revealed to him, he was to witness and give testimony to the truth of the revelation. That was the call given to him by God. In this section of John's gospel it seems we almost have a diary from the life of John the Baptist for we have another verse which begins "the next day." It seems that Jesus is still in the neighborhood and as he is walking by John sees him and again points him out with the phrase: "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The previous time this is said, we are not told to whom the comment is made, nor is there any follow up. Now when he makes the comment he is standing with two of his disciples, two men who have come to him and looked upon him as their teacher. When they hear this testimony of their teacher, they follow Jesus. John's role has been completed and he is stepping aside after pointing to the one whose way he has prepared. We have been viewing these texts through the lens of call, of God's call. And the subtitle to the portion of the text we have now reached is *Jesus' First Disciples*. We are most familiar with the call of the disciples as given in Matthew, Mark and Luke that describe Jesus walking by the Sea of Galilee and issuing those famous words of "Come, follow me". It is those words of call which cause those two pairs of brothers to leave their nets, boats and even their father to begin going about the countryside with Jesus that we associate with Jesus' calling of disciples. Yet that is not the scene here. Those called are not the same. And the words are definitely not the same. Here, Jesus notices that they are already following him. Remember, "the two disciples heard him, John, say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?'" You see that is a very different question the one issued in the synoptic gospels. Jesus wants to know what they are seeking. In the narrative, these two don't answer that question. Instead, "They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?'. Perhaps they are not sure what they are seeking. Perhaps, they are not yet ready to accept the declaration made by their former teacher, but are seeking to just transfer to another teacher. The text does not inform us of their motivations. What we do have is the response of Jesus. "He said to them, 'Come and see.'" Jesus invites them to come and be in relationship with him; to come and find what they are seeking; he invites them to come nearer. And in many ways perhaps that is a deeper meaning of what it means to become a disciple, to become a follower. In this description of Jesus calling of disciples by the invitation to come and see, to draw nearer to him, we can see a clearer view of his role in God's purpose which was reconciliation—the redemption of humanity by drawing us closer through Jesus. The traditional interpretations of this passage to proclaim and confirm Jesus' identity are true, the role of John the Baptist to prepare the way is true, but the lens of John's gospel about how Jesus calls disciples is also important because the question

in that exchange apply not just to those mentioned in the scripture but to us. Jesus wants to know “What are you looking for?” And we must find the answer to where he is staying. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.