

Called and Sent

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Amos answered Amaziah, 'I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees ...' **Amos 7:14**

The first Gospel passage below is included for the sake of comparisons made in the sermon. The second gospel is appointed for this day. One verse is added beyond what is indicated in the lectionary.

[Jesus] went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons. So he appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); ¹⁷James son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); and Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. **Mark 3:13-19**

Jesus called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them. The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. **Mark 6: 7-13,30**

"Jesus called the twelve and began to send them out two by two."

We Christians, followers of Jesus, know that the word 'call' is a mainspring of our faith. It gets our attention. Some of us are drawn to the notion of calling like moths to a flame. Others of us run for our lives, hoping that God won't stake a claim on us.

For all of its import, we don't always know what calling means, or what it means for us, or how to respond if and when we sense a call. One starting point may be the word as found in today's gospel: Jesus 'called the twelve and began to send them.' But a nuance is missed here. In other translations, Jesus '*summoned the twelve*' (NASB) or he "*called the twelve to himself*." (KJV)

So the calling and the sending are not synonymous. Rather, a two-fold movement is suggested. First they receive the call and move toward Christ. They draw near to deepen in understanding of who he is and who they are. *Then* they are sent out where he sends them.

If we added one more verse to today's reading, from later in the same chapter, we would actually see a three-fold movement. After the twelve had been sent and instructed by Jesus, and after they had proclaimed, exorcised and cured, '*The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught.*'

Imagine their enthusiasm and gratitude. They remind me in their return of a line from the author Frederick Buechner. He writes that to have a true calling, a vocation, as a Christian is to find and know and practice "*the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.*" (*Wishful Thinking*, 1993) Buechner also knows that a true calling may well require one to pick up a cross and suffer. But he may have partly been contemplating today's passage: first, called closer to Jesus, then sent out by him, then returning to him again. Whether in gladness or suffering, a true call draws us closer and closer to the example and the presence and the joy and suffering in the heart of Christ.

The exact form of the word ‘call’ that I mentioned is used in only one other place in all of the New Testament, three chapters earlier in this same gospel. Listen to the parallels with today’s story: Jesus ‘called’ and ‘appointed twelve’ ... ‘to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons.’

This prior passage is mainly anticipatory. The apostles are ‘to be sent out’ and they are ‘to have authority.’ But not yet. It takes three more chapters before we arrive at today’s scene, where Jesus ‘began to send them out two by two.’ Why three chapters between the first call of the apostles and the start of their mission? Why do the twelve recede in these chapters? Why, when they are mentioned, are they portrayed as such sophomores? For example, Jesus taught in parables, and they had to ask the meaning. (4:10) Elsewhere, they panicked during a storm at sea, as we heard three weeks ago. After calming the storm, Jesus asks, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" (4:40) They are still learning. They are not yet ready.

Then, last week, Jesus “came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him.” I explained that the particular Greek word for follow used there incorporates the word for ‘road.’ The twelve were ‘on the road’ with Jesus, and it’s striking and lovely that they are so portrayed in the passage just prior to today’s story. Now they are ready to take their God-given gifts and mission on the road by themselves. And Jesus ‘began to send them out two by two.’

In the three-chapter interval between the two similar texts that I’ve mentioned, the gospel author consistently and deftly suggests that the apostles are learning and preparing. Some of us, I imagine, may recognize this interval between being called and being sent. We have an inkling of a call – a gift waiting to be shared, or some risk or a new chapter we are contemplating, or some new work of prophecy or compassion in the name of God. But we may still be far from ready to take it on the road. Navigating the chapters of waiting and preparing can be tricky. Persevering may be difficult. But the example of the apostles suggests that it may be OK to be not-yet-ready. It’s OK to have questions. It’s natural to panic in a storm. Even the apostles, after they were so named, had a lot more to figure out about Jesus.

I’m tempted to liken the apostles, during their three-chapter season of preparation, to parish seminarians. But there’s a risk in that comparison. It confines the notion of calling and sending to those of us who are clergy, or those who are preparing to be clergy, when in fact, in theory, all Christians are called and sent – each of us with our unique gifts, each of us to make Christ known in word and deed, in courage and humility, in justice and love.

Let’s remember that those now called apostles had been fishermen and tax collectors. And did you hear the disclaimer of Amos in today’s first reading? “*I am not a prophet! My dad wasn’t even a prophet! I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees ...*” (Don’t ask me what a dresser of sycamores does – I didn’t dig that deep.) And I probably shouldn’t even go there, but I doubt if Amos or any of the apostles would have survived a diocesan commission on ministry! And yet you and I are here today in part because these others were called and sent, and others after them, generation after generations, more lay persons than clergy, were also called and sent and have been faithful witnesses.

Take a moment now, if you will, to imagine those of future generations who will also know and follow Jesus, and who will do so because you and I in our time heard the call of Jesus, and climbed the learning curve, and drew near to him, and went where we believe he sent us.

Amen.