

“God Is Faithful”

John 1:29-42; I Corinthians 1:1-9 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – January 15, 2023

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might remember your faithfulness and follow your Christ into the future boldly. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

For two not-very-long passages, there are a lot of people in our scripture lessons this morning. We've got John the Baptist, and Jesus of course, and Andrew and the other unnamed disciple of John that ended up following Jesus, and then Andrew's brother, Simon soon-to-become Peter/Cephas, and then in the other reading, there's Paul and Sosthenes, about whom we know very little. But then did you notice who else is in there? Because it's pretty much the whole rest of the church, including us. Paul's letter is most directly to the church in Corinth, but it's also addressed to “all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.” That's us! Well, us and a whole lot of other people.

And what a gift it is to be included in this group! Because it seems to me that our message this morning is about encouragement, and we could certainly use some of that. Our scriptures recently have been directing our attention to the pivotal moments at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. We looked at the story of Jesus' baptism last week, as told by Matthew. That experience is referenced, though indirectly, here in our reading from John, when John talks about seeing the Spirit descend like a dove and remain on Jesus, but without mentioning the baptism part.

And then, of course, this passage from John also represents the beginning of God's call upon the lives of the first disciples. John nudges them in Jesus' direction. And they begin following him, apparently without saying a word to him, until he asks them what they're looking for. Even then, their answer is a little awkward. They don't ask him if he's the Messiah. They don't tell him what John said about him. They don't even ask where he's going or what he's doing. They say "Rabbi, where are you staying?" Maybe they're not sure they're ready to follow and they just want to keep their options open, so they want to learn how to find him again if needed. Maybe they're just shy and awkward. At any rate, Jesus' answer is more expansive than a simple address, probably because he knows they're asking more than it sounds like. "Come and see."

Paul refers to his call as well, in his address to the church in Corinth. He names himself as "called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God." He says that the people he's writing to are "called to be saints," and at the end of this opening, he says that they were "called into the fellowship of God's Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." Even if we go back into the passage from John, we see John himself referencing his call, when he talks about "the one who sent me to baptize with water." All these various references remind us that there is something powerful about remembering the beginning of something. And when that something is ministry – that is, being the church – there is something powerful about remembering the call that sent us here. Because ministry can be hard. Being the church – faithfully and

fruitfully – can be hard. It can seem like it's not working. It can seem like it's doomed to failure. But if we harken back and recall why we're here, we will remember the One who called us into this story, and hopefully, we'll remember the thing that Paul assured the Corinthians of at the end of that greeting: God is faithful. God is the reason we are here, and God is faithful.

We are still in the opening weeks of our 75th anniversary year, and that's exciting and fun. But it's also a little anxious and uncertain. Part of what we have ahead of us is deep conversations about who we are as a congregation and what God is calling us to do at this point in history. We are not fully recovered from the pandemic, much like every other church around us. We have sustained losses, both during the pandemic and prior to that, that bring feelings of sadness and disappointment and confusion. We are coming to understand that welcoming people into a community of faith has gotten a lot more complicated than it was 25 or 50 years ago, when participation in a church was an expected obligation. We know that we have something special here, but that many of the folks who could benefit from it don't feel a church-shaped hole in their lives. We can feel the swirlings of history and culture sweeping around us, demanding a response that is faithful to the gospel of justice and compassion, but we haven't quite figured out how to talk about that in ways that bring light and not just heat. We could use some encouragement.

So here is Paul, telling us what we need to hear: God is faithful. The One who called you will not fail you or abandon you. There are memes going around social

media these days trying to claim that the Christianity of Paul and the Christianity of Jesus are somehow two things, as if Paul hijacked Christianity from Jesus and distorted it into something else. Not to say that there aren't differences, but I believe such a claim overstates the case. Certainly reading the first nine verses of First Corinthians, where Paul mentions Jesus nine times would make it hard to support such an idea. Indeed, I think the pairing of these two passages suggests that Jesus would have appreciated Paul's message of encouragement.

Jesus had a very light touch when Andrew and his friend first approached him. I'm sure it was obvious what they wanted, even though they weren't articulate enough to really explain themselves. "Come and see," he said. But by the time they'd gone to get Simon and bring him back, I think he might have been getting excited. Could it be that Jesus wasn't entirely sure this whole thing would launch like it was supposed to? But then Simon arrives, and something clicks. Jesus says to him, "You are to be called Cephas." And John (the gospel writer) explains that this is translated Peter, but what we really need to remember is that it's also translated Rock. And when you know that, you're now equipped to imagine the relief that is flooding Jesus' soul in that moment. "This is what I needed. Someone solid. Someone I can depend on. Someone who will be steady and carry things through.' Now, you know as well as I do that Peter wasn't quite as reliable as Jesus might have been hoping. But who amongst us is? But again, remembering those moments of call, for Jesus and for Peter, must have been a source of encouragement later on.

This is part of why we gather for worship every Sunday. We come to remember. We come to remember that it is God who called us together and sends us forth to serve. And we come to remember that God is faithful. We come to be reminded of the kind of work that Christ invites us to in the world – work of reconciliation and justice and compassion and healing and yes, encouragement. The word “courage” is there in the middle of “encouragement.” And in the middle of both of them is “cour” which ultimately comes from the word for “heart.” We gather together to open our hearts to God and one another, so that we might be, as Paul put it, strengthened, to do and endure through hard things.

We remember the life and legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., this weekend. So often, we shorten that name to just MLK. But I use the “Rev. Dr.” pointedly today, because King’s life was lived out in the church. His formation was in the church. And I believe he was only able to do what he did because of his faith and his trust that God is, indeed, faithful. But as we know, even Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., needed encouragement sometimes. He was giving his speech at the March on Washington in 1963. That speech had been very carefully and thoroughly thought through, by King and many advisers. But it wasn’t quite landing. The crowd just wasn’t connecting like he needed them to. It was then that Mahalia Jackson, who had sung just before he got up, called out to him, “Tell them about the dream, Martin!” And he set aside his notes and launched into what became the most famous speech of a lifetime of famous speeches.

Sometimes we have to turn back to the call, the thing that God has put us here for. We have to remind one another, encourage one another, to remember that God is the One who invited us into this work, this community, this fellowship, and God is faithful. Times are hard and complicated. But God is faithful. Numbers are small, but God is faithful. Workers are few, but God is faithful. Even the most solid rocks among us are sometimes shaky, but God is faithful. The work may require deep sacrifice, but God is faithful. Some may turn away and reject the truth of the gospel as we proclaim it, but God is faithful. We are together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and God is faithful. We have been enriched and granted every spiritual gift, and God is faithful. We will be strengthened to the end, for God is faithful. We have been called into the fellowship of God's Son, Jesus Christ, and God is faithful. Let us give thanks to God, for God is faithful.

Hallelujah and Amen!