

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Anne Slakey
June 7, 2026 — The Second Sunday after Pentecost
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Sacramento, California

I want to reflect today on the experience of being called. It can be large and life changing, or it can be a reminder to go deeper in the place where we are. But it often contains a mysterious component, because God calls us to do or be something we can only begin to imagine. Paul describes this well when he says God “gives life to the dead, and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” It can be hard to move towards something we can only dimly see. So I want to take a look at this in all of the stories of call we have today, with a bit of my own story, but mostly Abram, Paul and Matthew.

On this first Sunday in Ordinary Time, its amazing that we begin at the beginning with Abraham, and also hear the call story for Matthew, which is the Gospel in Year A.

Robert Alter, whose translation of the Hebrew Bible I cannot recommend highly enough, points out that today's reading is a decisive turning point in Genesis, and indeed, all of scripture. After the disaster with Adam and Eve, God has done little but curse: Adam, Eve, Cain, Abel, the sons of Noah, all the way to the tower of Babel, which immediately precedes today's readings. Now, God is ready to bless, and to bless through humankind. He tells Abram to get up and go to a new country, and God will make of him a great nation. He says, “I will bless you, and you will be a blessing....and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Today's reading tells us that Abram went, and gives us some description of places he travelled, but little insight into Abram's thoughts or relationship with the God who calls him. That strange and interesting story comes later. But we know he did the most important thing. He believed in the vision God had set out for him, though he could not see all of it, and he set out on the path he could see immediately before him.

Paul reflects on Abram's journey through the lens of the resurrection and his own transformed faith. Moses and the law are no longer central, although he had been a Pharisee. Now, Abram's journey is primary, and it is one of faith, trust and grace. Abram believed that he would be the father of many nations, though he was old and Sarah was past childbearing age. He trusted that God could and would do what he said. Paul believes that he is seeing the fulfillment of the

promise to Abraham “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” Now the Gospel is spreading to many nations, who become children of Abraham.

Though I can see Paul’s point, I think the promise is still unfulfilled. because The children of Abraham, which includes Christians, Muslims, and Jews, are not yet at peace with each other. In God’s vision, all the children of Abraham bless and are blessings to each other, as well as blessing the world.

In my own story, I relate to Abram’s journey and to what Paul says about God, who “gives life to the dead, and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” When, as a Roman Catholic woman, I was called to the priesthood, I was called to something I had never seen, and, I was repeatedly told, something that could never be. But the call would not leave me alone, and I found myself repeatedly testing what I was told against what I knew about God and Christ. I knew that “in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, man nor woman, slave nor free.” In the Sisters of St. Scholastica I met women who, in different ways showed me Christ. I became more and more convinced that women could and did represent Christ and could stand behind the altar. . It was about six years into my journey before I saw a woman celebrate at an Episcopal Church. God had already called into existence things people told me could not exist. It was beautiful to see, and it let me know I was standing on solid ground.

Which brings us to Matthew, and how Jesus called a follower, future apostle, and perhaps author of a Gospel into being from a most unlikely person, a tax collector. Jesus calls new things out of Matthew, he calls into being someone who does not yet exist.

We should picture Matthew sitting in a booth outside, near the city gates, calling over people carrying taxable items. We can imagine the heat, dust, and dirt. We know little about Matthew’s frame of mind or backstory. We can be sure that that day and every day he was met with combined fear and scorn from those interacting with him. Then Jesus walks by, perhaps the first person that day to look at him as one human to another. When Jesus calls him to follow, Matthew gets up, leaving the profits of the day behind. He may have heard about Jesus before, but even with that, he probably has little idea of where this is leading. But he takes those first steps. He walks and talks with Jesus and the others for a ways, and then has an idea. He invites them to his house for dinner.

At dinner, Matthew starts to get a clearer idea of who Jesus is, and who the Father Jesus talks about is. He had invited his tax collector friends and other outcasts from the synagogue, and he sees that Jesus and his followers treat them well. Then, he hears Jesus defend them from the Pharisees “Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy and not sacrifice.” We can imagine that God’s mercy

and healing begin to sink in. Then Jesus gets up and heads out to help someone. As he leaves, Jesus is touched by a woman with a flow of blood, who is healed on the spot. Matthew might have reflected on the fact that she, like him, was an outcast by law. She shouldn't even be in the room, because those she touched would be unclean. Matthew saw further evidence of the God of mercy and grace, and that, we may conclude, was enough. From that day forward, Matthew followed Jesus. In the end, he was one of Jesus' closest disciples, because he was numbered among the twelve.

It's an open question how much Matthew might have contributed to the Gospel that bears his name. Perhaps he is behind traditions that shape it, which are later combined with Mark's Gospel. If Matthew did write this Gospel, it's interesting that it is the Gospel most concerned with demonstrating Jesus' ties to Jewish tradition. In that concern, we might see Matthew reaching out in mercy to Pharisees and adherents of the law who had snubbed and scorned him.

We have an amazing and loving God. Our God can reach into the fabric of human history and reweave it. Our God calls out in us things that we are only beginning to imagine. God gives us new life, and calls into existence things that do not yet exist. Let us praise and thank him for all the ways he has been at work in us and in the world. May we listen and follow in faith and trust as Abram, Paul, and Matthew did.