

Making Space for God

Lessons from Mark #3—The Calling of Matthew

Opening Prayer

Father, I abandon myself into your hands; do with me what you will. Whatever you may do, I thank you; I am ready for all, I accept all. Let only your will be done in me, and in all your creatures. I wish no more than this, O Lord, into your hands I commend my soul; I offer it to you with all the love of my heart, for I love you, Lord and so need to give myself, to surrender myself into your hands, without reserve, and with boundless confidence.

Charles de Foucauld 1859-1916

Arrival

Take some times to settle yourself. Invite the Lord to guide and direct your thoughts for the day. Think back over where you have been in the last four weeks. What burdens, emotions, and concerns do you carry? What are you thankful for? When have you experienced the Lord's presence? Journal your thoughts and offer these to the Lord.

Scripture—Mark 2:13-17

¹³ Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. ¹⁴ As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

¹⁵ While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.

¹⁶ When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

¹⁷ On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."¹



Matthew the Man

In Mark's gospel, he was the fifth disciple and the first non-fisherman to be called by Jesus. Levi, son of Alphaeus, better known as Matthew, was a tax collector in service to Herod Antipas, the king responsible for John the Baptist's death. He was an educated man who probably knew both Aramaic and Greek. His occupation made him both wealthy yet despised by fellow Jews who viewed his kind as traitors to the Jewish cause. Scholars regard his orderly gospel account as probably the most influential in its day.

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² This work, the *Calling of Saint Matthew* by Caravaggio, has been identified as being free of known restrictions under copyright law, including all related and neighboring rights. Downloaded from Wiki Commons.

Artistic Reflection

The Painter—Michelangelo Merisi (1571-1610), better known as Caravaggio, from the Italian town where he was born, was the bad-boy sensation of the late Renaissance art world. His realistic style made dramatic use of light and shadow to reflect emotional intensity. His religious masterpieces shaped a generation of artists who followed him. But his private life was mess. He was a violent, paranoid, and provocative man with a lengthy police record that included drunken brawls, murder, and encounters with both male and female prostitutes. He died of suspicious causes at age 38. Like Van Gogh, his sanest moments occurred while painting. Forensic evidence suggests he had lead poisoning that could have contributed to his erratic behavior. Lead was a compound found in paint.

The Painting—The Calling of Saint Matthew, 1600. The painting measures ten feet square. The human figures are life size. For the past four hundred years, the painting has been housed in an alcove at San Luigi die Francesi, a French chapel in Rome. Two other works by Caravaggio—The *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* and the *Inspiration of Saint Matthew* share the alcove space. Great artists like Caravaggio create visual parables with their work. They invite us to look more closely to discover a deeper meaning.

In *The Calling*, barefoot Jesus and Peter enter a drab institutional room from the right. Peter stands in a shadow in front and slightly forward of Jesus. He positions his muscular body in a way that seems to protect Jesus from the five men on the left who come for a class very different from his own. The five men represent institutional power that will one day kill both of them. The five are dressed well in colorful silk and all wearing shoes. Both Peter and Jesus point towards the group at the table; Jesus with a limp wrist and Peter with a more assertive grip. A shaft of light, illuminating the faces of the two men and the pointing hand of Jesus, shines on the men at the table. Scholars have noted that the position of Jesus' hand is identical to that of Adam's hand painted by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel. God reaches out to Adam and their finger tips touch. A relationship is born and life is exchanged. Jesus, the second Adam, calls Matthew to follow. He offers friendship and new life through an outstretched hand.

The two boys on the right notice Jesus and Peter but seem to be unperturbed by the interruption. The older and younger men on the left never look up. Their focus is on counting money. A profound encounter happens in a mundane moment and as is true in life, most of the people miss it. In the middle is a bearded man with a cap. His eyes are riveted on the fingers of Jesus. His lips begin to part in astonishment. With his right hand he is about to place a coin on the table. With his left hand, he points to himself as if to say, "Do you mean me?"

Caravaggio captures the transformative moment in Matthew's life. The story suggests that rarely do we initiate our own spiritual transformation. Instead we respond to the initiative of someone who seems to us disguised or partly hidden in the shadows. These moments come to us unexpectedly—illness, loss, a disturbing dream, boredom, failure, a new job or a new child. Often these moments feel like an intrusion disrupting our normal living routine. Probably the best way for us to respond is to stop what we are doing, notice, and ask, "Are you speaking to me Jesus?"³

Benediction

May the Lord Jesus help you to stop, notice, and respond to the transformative moments in your life this next month. Amen

³ Artistic Reflection by Steven Stuckey 2017