

Matthew 4:12-25 – Epiphany 3 – Follow Me – January 25, 2026

+In Nomine Iesu+

Today, the Church remembers the Conversion of St. Paul. Our shared devotion, *Celebrating the Saints*, has an excellent summary of this commemoration for you today. What I would like you to notice is the change in Paul's life.

He goes from a persecutor of the Church, to preaching the Gospel. He goes from the popular way, to the rejected way. He goes from living his own life, to a life of discipleship—following Jesus Christ. He experiences a total reversal in his understanding of theology, religion, and even politics. When Christ enters the heart, life changes.

The change that we see in Paul is first reflected in the lives of the Twelve Disciples. In our Gospel reading, Matthew points us to the beginning of the ministry of Jesus following His Baptism in the Jordan River and then His temptation in the wilderness. We will hear about the temptation in Matthew at the beginning of Lent.

Jesus now sets His base of operations in Capernaum. And from there He begins to go out and call the Twelve to Himself. As I mentioned last week, we hear about four in this text—Peter, Andrew, James and John. Each one becomes a Disciple—a learner and follower of Jesus Christ. And I want you to think of yourself as the same.

Soren Kierkegaard, a famous Lutheran theologian and philosopher once said, “Discipleship...provides the guarantee that Christianity does not become poetry, mythology, and abstract idea.” Discipleship is a call to follow Jesus Christ—and as we see with the early Disciples—it is a concrete kind of change. To have Jesus as our Savior means that we also have Him as our Lord.

We talk a lot about grace as a free gift. And it is. Christ does all the work of our salvation. As the great *solus*, or “only” statements of the Reformation remind us, we are indeed saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. And truly we add nothing, absolutely nothing, to our forgiveness. Grace is neither earned nor deserved.

But sometimes we are guilty of seeing the free gift of God—because it is free—as something not that important. Christianity can be quickly reduced to slogans, sentiments, and nursery rhymes, apart from discipleship. We are often more interested in sports, or politics, or pop-culture. Grace can become cheap, ordinary—even boring—and Christianity can be safely ignored—if it demands nothing of us.

So today, from our reading, we are going to continue what we started last week. We are going to define discipleship and its relationship to the grace of God, realizing one doesn't exist without the other. Again, you cannot have Jesus as Savior unless you also have Him as Lord. His roles in your life cannot be separated.

Our Gospel reading begins with the arrest of John the Baptist. It appears to be just a passing note, but it is significant. John the Baptist went to prison for his preaching. In fact, he is in prison for confronting Herod Antipas about the adulterous relationship with his brother's wife. In the near future, John the Baptist will also become a martyr, dying for the truth. And it is after this important moment in the Gospel account that Jesus begins His ministry.

And it is the heightened religious and social tension that causes Jesus to depart to the region around Galilee. And as He does so, Matthew tells us that Jesus is now fulfilling the prediction in our Old Testament reading from the Prophet Isaiah.

Jesus goes into a region where there are lots of Gentiles. It is for those, in Isaiah's words, who "sit in darkness." He goes to a people dwelling in darkness and in shadow. To a people whose ideas are full of error and falsehood. To a people who don't know the truth, and whose lives are spiritually, morally, and personally dark. And people like this will see a great light.

The light is Jesus. The light is grace—unmerited favor. The light is the call of Jesus into His life—a life of discipleship. His word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. He invites us to become those who follow Jesus.

From now until the middle of February, our Gospel readings and sermons will center around Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The reading today is the precursor to the Sermon. And it gives us a glimpse into the context out of which flows this magnificent Sermon of Jesus.

Jesus preaches this Sermon to His Disciples. And He will begin the Sermon with the Gospel—with Beatitudes—the blessings of God for the poor in Spirit—and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. But almost all of the Sermon is about Discipleship. The Church is to reflect the light of Christ to the world. We are to rid our lives of anger and lust. We are to pray for our enemies. We are to people who practice prayer and fasting.

And here in our reading Jesus begins to bring His light as He says, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." And repentance means to turn. It is God's gracious work that leads a person to renounce sin—to look in faith to God for His mercy—and for the strength to return to God's ways. It is a change of mind.

And perhaps these first words from Jesus as He begins His ministry might reveal some of the darkness that still clings to us today. Instead of repentance, we might find that we would prefer to stay in our sin.

Sure, we want forgiveness, but we also want to live in our old ways. We don't want repentance to be difficult. We want it to be easy. We want freedom in Christ to mean we can live just like the world does—no differences. We don't want to stand out.

But that is not the way of these first Disciples. Jesus calls and says, "Follow me" and they simply follow—walking away from their own chosen path in the world. It is interesting that the text gives us no elaborate psychological discussion of this encounter. No explanation of what was going on in their minds.

And here it is because there is only one good reason for their response. It isn't because they are sick of their lives and are ready for a change. It is because Jesus is the One doing the calling. This encounter gives witness to Jesus' unconditional, immediate, and inexplicable authority.

Jesus calls them—just as Jesus calls us to discipleship. We are called to be people who follow Christ. Not just as students follow a teacher, or as a role model, but as the true light that has come into a world sitting in darkness. He is the Christ, the Son of God.

We are called to step out of our former existence and simply follow. Former things are left behind. And this following will change our lives dramatically. We no longer choose our own path. He is the Lord. He is our Master. And outwardly, it will look as if we have given up a lot!

As a Prophet, John the Baptist condemns the politics of the Herodians—and their immoral lifestyle. This is His calling. And it is actually good for the Herodians if they will

simply listen to God's Word. But in his faithfulness, John gives up his freedom and his own life to follow Christ.

Andrew and Peter, James and John will give up their livelihoods and careers to follow Jesus. This first encounter with Jesus changes them. Their discipleship will place demands on their family relationships. It will put them at odds with their culture. It will put them out of step with the pursuits of the world. It will cost them their very lives.

And the same must be true for us. Following Jesus means that we are following Jesus—if you will allow me a little obvious—albeit circular logic. Jesus said “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

Obviously, we do not earn His grace by following. But to want His grace without the cost of discipleship is to misunderstand His grace. In a very real sense, we are not our own. We are no longer the captains of our own fate. We don't make our own destiny. We belong to Christ. Life is lived His way.

He purchased and won us by His Cross and Resurrection. And He demands things of those that are His. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6 “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” And yet, all of this is for our eternal good. We are being shaped into His people—the people He intends to save for all eternity.

You have heard me mention the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer before. His book *Discipleship* or *The Cost of Discipleship* has become one of the most influential books for me about the Christian life. Perhaps his words are worth listening to here, as one whose discipleship cost him his very life.

I conclude the sermon today with a somewhat long quote from his book which is really just a commentary on Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount*. You have heard some of this quotation from me before, but it is worth repeating.

This reading is from his introduction. I encourage you to stay tuned in, as he defines grace and discipleship and their intimate connection. He contrasts what He calls cheap grace, with costly grace, as he calls us to follow Christ. To have Jesus as our Savior is also to have Him as Lord. It was true for Paul, and the Twelve—and it is true for us. Listen.

“Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without repentance; it is Baptism without the discipline of community; it is the Lord's Supper without confession of sin; it is absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Christ.

“Costly grace is the hidden treasure in the field, for the sake of which people go and sell with joy everything they have. It is the costly pearl, for whose price the merchant sells all that he has; it is Christ's sovereignty, for the sake of which you tear out an eye if it causes you to stumble. It is the call of Jesus which causes a disciple to leave his nets and follow him.

“Costly grace is the Gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which has to be asked for, the door at which one has to knock.

“It is costly, because it calls to discipleship; it is grace, because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly, because it costs people their lives; it is grace, because it thereby

makes them live. It is costly, because it condemns sin; it is grace, because it justifies the sinner.

“Above all, grace is costly, because it was costly to God, because it costs God the life of God’s Son—“You were bought with a price”—and because nothing can be cheap to us when it is costly to God. Above all, it is grace because the life of God’s Son was not too costly for God to give in order to make us live. God did indeed, give Him up for us. Costly grace is the incarnation of God.

“Costly grace is grace as God’s holy treasure which must be protected from the world and which must not be thrown to the dogs. Thus it is grace as a living word, the word of God, which God speaks as God pleases. It comes to us as a gracious call to follow Jesus; it comes as a forgiving word to the fearful spirit and the broken heart. Grace is costly, because it forces people under the yoke of following Jesus Christ; it is grace when Jesus says, ‘My yoke is easy and my burden is light.’” In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+Soli Deo Gloria+