

Sermon
Kirk of St James
Sunday, January 25, 2026
Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

Grayson loves learning about animals, and animal facts, I actually have a file on my phone of cute animal videos just so he can watch them. It started a few years ago when I introduced him to Tilly the aardvark, who using her long snout explored a pumpkin after Halloween. Since then countless animals have joined the file—capybaras, pikas, quokkas, honey badgers and the list goes on. I actually love it, and I learn some neat things too. One type of bat I have recently learned about is the Mexican free tailed bat. While I have a paralyzing fear of bats, one neat fact about them has stuck with me. These bats roost in large colonies, and when they begin to have their pups there can be up to five hundred in one square foot. Using three basic things they are able to find their own pup even amongst those many babies.

- **Vocal Recognition:** Mothers and pups recognize each other through specialized calls. A mother emits specific, repetitive, and loud calls that are distinguishable from the background noise, which the pup replies to with its own unique, individual cry.
- **Scent:** In addition to sound, mother bats use their highly developed sense of smell to identify their own pups among thousands of others.
- **Spatial Memory:** Mothers remember the general location of their pup within the cave (e.g., specific walls or ceiling areas).

It is difficult to imagine a bat being able to find its own baby among thousands. I mean I can stand in the same room as my children and they still don't hear me!

Professor Rodger Nishoika tells a story about watching a show on elephant seals and how they call to their young amongst the hundreds on the beach. While watching mothers reuniting with their babies on shore his father, a presbyterian minister turned to him and said “You know that’s how it is with God. We are imprinted with a memory of God, and God is imprinted with a memory of us, and even if it takes a lifetime, we will find each other.” That image echoes St Augustine who famously said, “our hearts are restless until they rest in God.” When we come to the book of Matthew today, we come to a passage where the

disciples immediate and decisive decision about Jesus, may make us wonder why they felt so certain when Jesus first called them.

Many of us likely wish our lives and our calling felt this obvious and clear. “Oh yes God, absolutely, that sounds perfectly reasonable and doable, thank you for such clear cut directions!” likely said none of us ever! It is not just that we often do not get these specific calls, but that our own human nature also factors in. Our doubts, our fears, how scary it can be to trust in the face of the unknown—all of those things complicate our lives. Not to mention how we are bombarded with information in today’s global age. Even within Christianity itself we see these huge divides in beliefs about what it means to be Christian in 2026. There are a lot of voices that claim if we do not do these things that means we are not Christians, just as there are a lot of voices that say the opposite. What voices are right? What ones do we follow?

So many aspects of discernment--of what it means to be a Christian comes back to the source material. Does this person, does this voice, line up consistently with the God we have come to know in scripture? Throughout history people have twisted both Christianity and the bible to suit their beliefs. For example, some used the bible to both argue for and justify slavery and segregation in the south. Some people have used the bible to suggest that women are not worthy of leadership in the church, or that they should be subjugated to men. People have used the bible to justify wars and killing. None of those voices are consistent with the God we find in scripture.

One of the greatest gifts of epiphany—of God incarnate, is that Jesus walked in this world, lived in this world, and that we were given a new commandment found in Matthew 22:34-40.

³⁴ But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. ³⁵ And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” ³⁷ And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

I suspect that many of the voices we hear, and unfortunately sometimes the loudest ones, do not honour those commandments. That if we were to trace practices back to their sources they would not be very biblical at all.

Yet today in our passage the disciples recognized the truth so fully that they immediately acted, they left their professions, they left their families and their lives, and followed Jesus. I am going to be honest, with the arrest of John the Baptist, and the society shaking, expectation flipping ministry of Jesus they likely were not going to fare much better than John who is eventually beheaded. That reality struck me this week.

If you were keeping an eye on Davos, Switzerland this week, there is a good chance you heard the speech by our prime minister. Perhaps like me when you heard him reference Vaclav Havel and his essay, "The Power of the Powerless" you went and did some digging.

I have a few excerpts I would like to share in light of the call of the disciples in Matthew this morning:

The manager of a fruit-and-vegetable shop places in his window, among the onions and carrots, the slogan: "Workers of the world, unite!" Why does he do it? What is he trying to communicate to the world? Is he genuinely enthusiastic about the idea of unity among the workers of the world? Is his enthusiasm so great that he feels an irrepressible impulse to acquaint the public with his ideals? Has he really given more than a moment's thought to how such a unification might occur and what it would mean?

I think it can safely be assumed that the overwhelming majority of shopkeepers never think about the slogans they put in their windows, nor do they use them to express their real opinions. That poster was delivered to our greengrocer from the enterprise headquarters along with the onions and carrots. He put them all into the window simply because it has been done that way for years, because everyone does it, and because that is the way it has to be. If he were to refuse, there could be trouble. He could be reproached for not having the proper decoration in his window; someone might even accuse him of disloyalty. He does it because these things must be done if one is to get along in life. It is one of the thousands of details that guarantee him a relatively tranquil life "in harmony with society," as they say...

We have seen that the real meaning of the greengrocer's slogan has nothing to do with what the text of the slogan actually says. Even so, this real meaning is quite clear and generally comprehensible because the code is so familiar: the greengrocer declares his loyalty (and he can do no other if his declaration is to be accepted) in the only way the regime is capable of hearing; that is, by accepting the prescribed ritual, by accepting appearances as reality, by accepting the given rules of the game. In doing so, however, he has himself become a player in the game, thus making it possible for the game to go on, for it to exist in the first place.”

It is a powerful essay, and I don't want to make it seem to small, or misapply the meaning. But one of the things I took from it was the truth of how it can also represent my Christian faith. We likely all understand that we make choices to keep our lives moving along, simple, and non combative. It is a bit like being on a roller coaster. I tuck my hands and arms in, I put the safety bar in place, and I go along for the ride. I try not to make waves. I want to pull into the platform, disembark and go on my way.

We have all likely been watching events south of our boarder. I wonder sometimes what I would do if I lived there, and I am scared of what the answer would be, but this week a five year old boy, in a floppy eared blue bunny hat, and a spider man back pack broke my heart. We have heard about arrests and executions in Iran of people who were brave enough to step out of line. I don't like to cause trouble. I am a rule follower. I am often timid. But gosh, if I look to Jesus, the source, and ask what would we have us do, that question is huge.

How do we love God and love others? How are we called even when it is scary? How do we know when to step out of line—and find the courage? I believe the disciples would say do what Jesus did. Listen, love, offer resources that are needed like water, or help. Do your best to live into your call. Use your voice whenever you can to speak for justice and to speak for love. If it were only us doing that, if we were to be the lone voice that would be scary. However, the truth is we aren't. If we were to look around here, if we are all shining our lights, it is not only a little less scary but also a lot more encouraging. Together let us hear the call of Jesus and respond with love and faith.