

January 19, Epiphany 2A (John 1:29–42)

What do we do when we read a story where the ending is already known?

by [Jennifer Moland-Kovash](#) in the [January 15, 2020](#) issue

In these next two weeks, the lectionary offers two different accounts of Jesus calling his first disciples. Not surprisingly, given that the accounts come from two different traditions, the stories are different—but they do overlap.

I raise this before talking about either of them because if you, like me, tend to reflect on the text one week at a time, next week could be tricky for you. This week—unless you happen to be observing the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul—Jesus calls Andrew and his brother Simon Peter while John the Baptizer and others are hanging out on the road. There’s no mention of fishing or the Sea of Galilee. But, if you look ahead to next week, John has been arrested—and you’ll see that these same two disciples get called, along with the sons of Zebedee, from their fishing post along the Sea of Galilee. So, preachers: beware—or at least alert that you have two weeks in a row of disciple calling.

I don’t often look ahead to the next week; nor am I tempted to skip ahead to the end of the story. I don’t read the last chapter of a mystery first, and while I try to figure things out along the way, I am often wrong. But what do we do when we read a story where the ending is known, like we do every week in worship? Even if people are not as biblically literate as we like to think they once were, it would be rare to have a hearer in worship this weekend who doesn’t know how the story of Jesus ends. In the case of the Gospel of John, regular Easter worship attendees will hear echoes of the resurrection account in these early days of Jesus’ ministry. It can be helpful to connect the dots between what we hear in the beginning to things that appear later.

John the Baptist has declared to those around him, “Here is the Lamb of God! This is the Son of God!” There’s a sense of relief when he does this. The priests and Levites, sent by the Pharisees, have been asking John who he is, and when Jesus appears it’s fun to imagine John’s proclamation being partly a statement of faith (*This is the*

Messiah!) and partly a exasperated cousin asking, *What took you so long, Jesus? Hey, everyone, here he is! This is the Lamb of God—the one I told you about!*

Jesus turns to the two people we come to know as Andrew and Simon Peter and asks them, “What are you looking for?”

They respond, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” But in their question the narrator inserts the translation for *rabbi* (which means teacher). John’s Gospel is full of these kinds of asides or stage notes, and this one in particular brings to mind the resurrection conversation that Jesus has with Mary at the tomb. Upon hearing him say her name she proclaims (gasps?), *Rabbouni!* And again John provides the translation.

It might feel strange to bring up the resurrection—and therefore the intervening lifetime of Jesus—just weeks after we celebrate his birth. The fast-forwarding of his life in these short weeks always feels rushed. But there is something compelling about the way the story draws us forward. As I said previously, the ending of this story is known to our listeners. And the same was certainly true for those who recorded these stories according to their traditions—they were written when the ending was already known.

In both this passage and the resurrection appearance, Jesus asks the question, “What/whom are you looking for?” Andrew and Simon Peter want to know where he’s staying, and Mary at the tomb is wondering where he has gone. She says to the angels, and then to Jesus (as the gardener), “I don’t know where he is. Tell me where you have laid him” (John 20:11–15).

In liturgical churches, we observed the end of the church year way back in November with Christ the King Sunday. Advent 1 gets our liturgical “Happy New Year” cries. But we are also Christians steeped in the culture, and here in early January, the end of the calendar year is still visible in our rearview mirrors when we encounter these scriptures in worship. We might even still be keeping the resolutions we made. The endings are still fresh when we are confronted with this new beginning of Jesus’ ministry and his calling of the disciples.

Here at the beginning, we might ask the question of ourselves and our congregations: “What are you looking for?” Maybe you’re setting goals or resolutions. Perhaps you’re working through relationship struggles or trying to discern a different path for your career. All of our attempts at resolutions and new

beginnings go back to answering the question of what we are looking for.

It would be too glib and simple to say the answer is always, “Jesus.” Instead we want to know where he is, how to find him, if he’s going to stay a while, and who can help us find him—not so we can keep him to ourselves but so we, too, can proclaim, “We have found the Messiah. I have seen the Lord.”