



“Whom Shall I Send?”

a sermon by

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The Bible self-proclaims that the very reading of scripture is a blessing in and of itself. So the blessing that we will receive today comes from the book of Isaiah, chapter 6:1-8- it is Isaiah's vision of God in the temple, and his experience of God's call upon his life as a prophet. "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

I once heard Dr. Tom Long, professor of preaching at Candler School of Theology, re-tell a short story he read in a collection written by Willa Williams called "Personal Testimony." As Dr. Long tells it, the story is told of a young girl, daughter of a conservative West Texas gospel preacher, who, every summer, was compelled by her father to go to a fundamentalist Bible camp. During the day, the camp looked like every other summer camp - there were arts and crafts, hiking and canoeing, bonding over songs, but at night...at night in the sweltering activity space there was the Come To Jesus meeting, filled with Bible-thumping and fire and brimstone preaching. It was an unwritten rule in the camp that every child, over the course of the week, was to stand up and give their personal testimony-sharing when they first came to know Jesus in their lives and how this knowledge changed them. For some this was not a problem. But for the majority of campers, who were pretty average kids with average experiences, this prospect terrified them. Well, it wasn't long before our young preacher's daughter figured out how to make a little extra cash. She became a ghost writer for Jesus. For \$5 she would dream up a personal testimony- like the one she did for Michael, which he delivered tear-stained before the camp as he told of how he would always take the Lord's name in vain at football practice, but since he found Jesus his mouth was now as pure as a mountain spring. Or, her favorite, the one of the boy who found the Lord one night when he lost control of his car on a dark country road when Jesus literally took hold of the steering wheel and guided him to safety. She got \$25 for that one.¹

I would imagine this text from Isaiah would make a good come to Jesus meeting story, complete with its own fire and brimstone and undeniable presence and influence of God. But the experience of the presence and call of God in one's life is not always so easily identifiable. For the prophet Isaiah it was the vision of a smoke-filled room and singing seraphs that signified that he was in the presence of the holy and the call of God, the way in which God would use Isaiah's life to do God's work, was made clear, 'whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' God says. I would venture to guess that if this sanctuary became filled with smoke, we would have it evacuated in about 1 minute flat, but likely would not pause to look for God or to listen for the singing of his heavenly hosts let alone stick around for some great commission. It just doesn't

¹As delivered by Dr. Tom Long at the Festival of Homiletics, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, Spring 2005.

work like that. And so, like those kids in the camp, we too may find ourselves willing to pay good money if it meant we could have the story of God's call on our lives handed over to us so that we wouldn't have to admit, even to ourselves, that the call of God just isn't always so clear. For those of us in the ordained ministry even the experience of being called forth to do God's work sure doesn't look like Isaiah's- quite different in fact. For some of my colleagues, it came in the form of a growing discontentment in their careers. For me, it occurred in a quiet experience of God's presence some years ago, but it would be over a decade before the direction of that call became fully realized. And for others, with far more or less supernatural an experience of God's presence, it took even longer. So what makes Isaiah so special to have such a call? And what does his call to the vocation of prophecy mean for us?

I suppose the first thing to note is that what makes Isaiah special is the fact that he is not so special at all. The vision is spectacular to be sure- God almighty seated on his throne flanked by beings singing worship and adoration all day long- testifying that not only is the temple overflowing with God's presence, but the whole earth is full of his glory. Awesome mystery and wonder abound. But, then again, this is God we're talking about here. And then there is Isaiah, who finds himself at the threshold of the temple in this vision, experiencing the only appropriate response for any human in the face of God- humility and fear. "Woe is me! He cries- 'I am lost for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!'" By all accounts, Isaiah should have dropped dead to the ground for seeing God, from whom even the other supernatural figures in the room shield their eyes. And not only should he be stricken dead for seeing the holy, he should probably lose his life for bringing profanity into the house of God. He could really screw things up here, for he is from a people of 'unclean lips', he himself even brings uncleanliness into a space where ritual purity is the only option. Remember that we are talking about an era round about 740 years before Christ was born and temple purity laws had already been established for about a thousand years or so. To come into the presence of the holy without first being purified is an abomination.

But rather than being stricken down, Isaiah is offered purity in an act of grace and mercy. "The seraph touched my mouth with (the hot coal) and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Isaiah is provided with what he needs so that in standing before God and going forth to do his work he will not be found lacking, but will be enabled to do the work to which he is called. It is not Isaiah's perfection that is required, only his willingness to receive the blessing. Flashy visions and religious experiences worthy of a camp revival aside, we can take great courage in this experience of Isaiah. For what we see in his call is neither the first nor the last Biblical witness of an extraordinary God enabling an ordinary human being for what would otherwise be an impossible task. It was not because of his capabilities that Isaiah was found worthy, it was because of his faithfulness. It was not by his ability to walk the straight and narrow after seeing God, but his acknowledgment of his sinfulness that provoked the blessing of absolution for his sins. And in this we stumble upon a truth that we can live by and find great hope in. That God does not call the equipped, he equips the called. Whether you have had a vivid religious experience or not, whether you live your life the way you believe you should or if you fall short of the goal, if your lips speak love or profanity, in every way you will always be found wanting by the standard of the law and the standard of the world, but God is prepared to work in you, and to do what it takes to provide for the ways you will forever fall short. So that in God's perfection these imperfect bodies and words of ours can be made instruments to convey God's perfect love. What an incredible thing to be a part of!

God does not speak directly to Isaiah to call him into his service- he doesn't have to. In acknowledgment of the grace that God has enacted for Isaiah, in the act of forgiveness and purity freely given despite his guilt and imperfection, Isaiah is compelled to serve out of love. He is not called by name. He is called by grace. He writes, "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!" The phrase is emphatic- as in enthusiastic. Exclamation point. The joyful and obedient response to seeing that the kingdom of God has a need that he just might be able to fill- and is glad to do so, for much is required of those to whom much has been given. Rather than follow the account of his call with a euphoric description of all the good things God has done for him, the verses that follow his call in our passage detail a grave commission- he is to preach judgment and destruction, to preach the hardening of the people's hearts, and the coming of emptiness where glad promises once flowed like a river. But he goes forth with this commission because he has already seen how the story ends- with the whole earth being full of God's glory. Just as it is today.

Whether Jesus steered your car to safety one night on a dark and rainy road, or you have felt the quiet, slow pull to dive into something deeper in your life Christ extends the commission to the prophets and to each of us to take up the call wherever we are with those last words of his to the disciples and to his church before he ascended. He said 'Go, and make disciples of every nation- baptizing them in the name of the father, and the son, and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded. And lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.'" 'Whom shall I send?' 'Go, and make disciples.' So goes the call to Isaiah and to all of us to speak a word of truth to the world. To speak a word of love in the name of Jesus Christ. How will you answer that call? 'Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, 'Here I am, Lord, send me.' Amen.