

“A Mighty Calling, a Simple Response”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
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Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-8

A couple of years ago, an unusual author named Po Bronson wrote a book that grabbed me from his very introduction. He began,

We are all writing the story of our life. We want to know what it's "about," what are its themes and which theme is on the rise. We demand of it something deeper, or richer, or more substantive. We want to know where we're headed--not to spoil our own ending by ruining the surprise, but we want to ensure that when the ending comes, it won't be shallow. We will have done something. We will not have squandered our time here. This book is about that urge, that need.

So in this book, What Should I Do With My Life, he follows a bunch of folks who live passionate lives to try and find hints for the rest of us. He asks,

Wouldn't it be so much easier if you got a letter in the mail when you were seventeen, signed by someone who had a pipeline to Ultimate Meaning, telling you exactly who you are and what your true destiny is? Then you could carry this letter around in your pocket, and when you got confused or distracted and suddenly melted down, you'd reach for your wallet and grab the letter and read it again and go, "Oh, *right*."¹

I always find it interesting to ask people who seem to love what they do, about how it was that they became an electrician, or a teacher, or a doctor. It is especially interesting, I think, when someone has had a sudden shift in their life work. How did you know that that was your passion? Sometimes they say there was inevitability to it. Sometimes even they don't quite know what happened. But they exude a passion for what they do and it shows. In our time of frequent job shifts, a rapidly changing global economy, and uncertain retirement benefits, it is perhaps the key existential question for us 21st century Christians – how do we find our calling, and how do we know when we have found it?

Some of the most fascinating people in the Bible are the prophets. Now, these prophets were not fortune tellers, or tarot card readers. Walter Brueggemann says we get this confused and take them as predictors, as in “Well, I'm no prophet but [I think it is going to rain tomorrow]” Instead, the prophets know in deep and intimate ways about the character of God. Prophets speak for God to the people, and then turn and speak to the people for God. They advocate for a variety of social positions that align, they thought, with God's will and purpose.²

I am not sure they liked what they did for they often had to present very tough positions that were not popular. (More on that later.) But there is a passion to what they do and say in the Bible. And I love how they describe how they became a prophet.

There is both a majesty and a predictability about how prophets describe their career start. “How did you become a prophet?” people must have asked Isaiah often. I mean, I don’t think too many high school guidance counselors were recommending prophecy as a high-paying career, back in those days or now. So it was a rather odd thing to have to explain. He doesn’t explain at the very beginning, at least of the book of Isaiah as we now have it. The question lingers a bit. How did you become a prophet? Some people asked admiringly. Others might have sneered, “Why do you think you are you so special?” So, finally, in chapter six, Isaiah tries to tell us what happened on that day he knew what he was to do with his life.

“In the year that King Uzziah died” – and with this beginning, Isaiah locates the beginning of his career as a prophet in God’s service with a very common dating. He begins with a common date – people would remember when it was that Uzziah died, maybe they even remembered where they were when they heard the news. They nod their heads. But what follows surpasses their memories. “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne.”

Isaiah locates his prophetic beginning with the changing of the throne, and then transports us to a heavenly throne. And what follows is an image so full of majesty and might we can scarcely comprehend. The Almighty King, sitting on a high and lofty throne. The hem of Yahweh’s robe filled the temple. You have to use your imagination to see the six-winged seraphs, angels perhaps, who waited on Yahweh. They called out “Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory.” And as they sang, the thresholds shook and the temple filled with smoke.

And Isaiah felt shattered by the overwhelming power of God’s holiness. There is such a majesty and awe that even the seraphim cover their faces.³ Remembering that no one can see the fullness of God’s glory and live, Isaiah cried out. “Woe is me!” But somehow he lives to tell the tale. And for the rest of his life he will remember that scene of Yahweh on a throne, surrounded by seraphim, with a heavenly chorus singing “Holy, Holy, Holy” in perfect harmony.

There is a common aspect to many of the call stories of the prophets and leaders in the Bible. And that is, that in the presence of God’s magnificence, their failings and frailties seem enormous. Their common response falls along the lines of “why me?” There has got to be a more suitable candidate. There has got to be someone who is a better speaker, someone who is so good people could never accuse them of being a hypocrite. Someone who has more time. Someone who knows Scripture better. Do you remember the movie, *Wayne’s World*? What was Garth and Wayne’s mantra? “I am not worthy! I am not worthy!”

Isaiah, in the face of God’s majesty, can barely stammer out that his feelings of unworthiness. “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!”

One of the parts of being a minister I like the most is getting to know so many people. And I have the occasion to connect people’s interests or abilities with opportunities that arise. Maybe we are looking for Sunday School teachers, or someone to coordinate our month as a

shelter for homeless parents and children. And often, I hear that same kind of Wayne's World response. I'm not worthy. I don't have the time. Maybe next year. I don't know the Bible well enough to teach kids? Me, lead in worship - who am I to speak? I say this not to harangue you, and I am actually not aware right this moment of any particular jobs that need filling here at church. I bring this up to show just how common it is, this response of Isaiah to God's mighty call. Not me! "I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips."

Over and over in the Bible, God calls people to do things, and they respond, "Who me? I am not worthy! You must be kidding." But God persists, like a persistent telemarketer calling out to Moses from a burning bush. God persists, like a winsome flirt appearing to old Sarah. God persists, like a mighty king summoning Isaiah. God persists, saying, "Yes, you. You're the one. I need you."

Isaiah, in recounting the story of how he became a prophet, doesn't even wait for his listeners to ask what happened next. Right after crying out about his unclean lips, he says,

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."

You see, God will prepare those whom God calls. God will provide enough tools, whether it be the tong with a live coal to purify unclean lips, or whether it be enough time in our busy lives, or courage to say truth to power, or the wisdom for leadership. The message of Isaiah's call story is that God will enable those whom God calls. And it does not matter if those being called feel worthy or if others may sneer or look around for better candidates.

After such a magnificent scene comes a mighty calling. The very voice of God says, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And Isaiah screws up his courage, tamps down his doubts, and gives a simple response that will forever change his life and the lives of those around him. "Here am I; send me!" With those few words, Isaiah accepts this calling of God to go on God's behalf, and to speak God's words to the people.

Our passage ended with verse eight, but the story continues immediately with the message God asks Isaiah to spread. And it is not an easy task. No happy ever after, blah blah blah. For Isaiah is sent with a tough message. "The mandate Isaiah receives," Rabbi Abraham Heschel writes,

is fraught with an appalling contradiction. He is told to be a prophet in order to thwart and to defeat the essential purpose of being a prophet. . . . It is generally assumed that the mission of a prophet is to open the people's hearts, to enhance their understanding, and to bring about rather than to prevent their turning to God.⁴

God said to Isaiah,

“Go and say to this people:
 “Keep listening, but do not comprehend;
 keep looking, but do not understand.”
 Make the mind of this people dull,
 and stop their ears,
 and shut their eyes,
 so that they may not look with their eyes,
 and listen with their ears,
 and comprehend with their minds,
 and turn and be healed.’
 Then I said, ‘How long, O Lord?’ And he said:
 ‘Until cities lie waste
 without inhabitant,
 and houses without people,
 and the land is utterly desolate (Isaiah 6:9-11).

This is not an easy message that God needed proclaimed by Isaiah. Luckily, for most of us, God calls us to speak messages that are not so difficult. To teach about God’s love and justice in a way that stretches the imagination and wonder of children and adults. To speak out in our jobs and in this city on behalf of God’s desire for justice for those most vulnerable. To create a community based on mutual invitation and mutual responsibility. Sometimes God will call us to do tough things – challenging things, unpopular things. To talk about power and responsibility and ask tough questions when power is being misused. To disagree with people we love and work for what is right. To stand up for someone who is being bullied or abused. To take risks and move out of our comfort zones.

As Po Bronson said, it would be nice and much easier if we all got a letter in the mail when we were seventeen, signed by someone who had a pipeline to Ultimate Meaning, telling us exactly who we are and what our true destiny is. Finding our calling isn’t that easy – but it is worth a lifelong search.

Maybe you came here today thinking about a new job. Maybe you came here today thinking that now that school is out, maybe this is the time to do something really important. Maybe you here today thinking that you’re not sure you want to keep on doing the same old grind for the next twenty years. Like the prophets of old, we will not always see the fruit of our labors. Holy callings do not produce immediate results, nor do they lead to success in the eyes of the world. But there is a satisfaction at knowing that you are doing what you should do with your life.

And maybe this story of Isaiah becoming a prophet will give you the courage to discover what and who God is calling you to be and do. And maybe years from now, you will try to tell the story of how it all changed. And you will look back, take a deep breath, and then begin the story. And just maybe, you will say “in the year that Mrs. Johnson was my teacher,” or “in the year I moved to Saint Paul,” or “in the year I became a member at Central.” Go out and live into your calling as a disciple of Christ. Amen.

¹ Po Bronson, What Should I Do With My Life? (Random House, 2002) 3.

² Walter Brueggemann, Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes (Westminster John Knox Press, 2002) 158-161.

³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, The Prophets, Volume 1 (Harper Torchbooks, 1962) 196, 50.

⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, The Prophets, Volume 2 (Harper Torchbooks, 1962) 89-90