

“Who Will Go?”
Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11
Sermon, 2/10/2019

A colleague of mine, who pastored a neighboring church to mine, subsequently became my district superintendent, and eventually my bishop. We were always friends, but we did not always agree. We, at times, had differing visions of how our ministries needed to be lived out. The good news is that we honestly and openly discussed our disagreements and differing visions. What we never disagreed about was the reality of ordained ministry as a response to an inexplicable sense of being called. We both understood our ministry vocationally. To this day I cannot give a specific day or event that led to my decision to head into the ordained ministry. I simply knew it was where and what I should do. It is now over sixty years since affirming that reality, and here I am, still affirming that sense of call. It is that sense, I suppose, that led me to say yes to Jane, at that time my District Superintendent, when she asked me to do a specific task on the District, which I was sure I did not want to do. My first response was to say no, which I did. Her response was to say, “If not you, who?” Perhaps not a fair response. Perhaps it was manipulative on her part. However it was a question that compelled an answer. I had the ability to do the task, I could find time to do it, and in my mind, it was a task needing to be done. “If not you” became, in my mind and heart, “If not me, then who?”

Living a life of faith, no matter who we are, is ultimately the result of a calling, a result of feeling compelled by a power, a force, a reality, that speaks to us. For that understanding, and several others, our passage from Isaiah this morning always “gets to me.” It challenges my heart. It is the call (or more likely a renewed call) to Isaiah. (Who doesn’t need a reminder now and then of where our hearts and minds belong?)

The passage graphically describes the innermost portion of The Temple, the place where Jews believed their God literally resided. The words are arresting.

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.

Now do what you want with this description, depict it as fact or myth, realistic or fanciful, but hear it for what it is - a story of a dramatic call to a renewed vocation. The following words make this clear.

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices 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 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!" And he said, "Go and say to my people..."

Again do as you want with the details, but hear the message. God spoke to Isaiah. Isaiah responded, accepted the call, and eventually became one of the major prophets of Israel.

Come, with me, now to another story of another call to ministry. It is from the gospel according to Luke.

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Geneseret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.

(Please notice, God's word can be spoken and taught anywhere, anytime, to anyone.)

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."

(Poor Simon, like Isaiah before him, has no clue what can be done if he hears a call and goes with it).

Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets. When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break.

(Simon may have been slow on the uptake, but he sees what is happening and responds.).

But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

(Isaiah said, "Woe is me! I am a man of unclean lips." Doesn't anyone get it? God calls unlikely people. Probably because that is the only kind there are.)

The good news is that the stories of the calling of Isaiah and Simon Peter do not end with their rejections of the call.

Rather they end with a variation of being told, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people."

And so we come back to where we began. I am not the only person in this room on whom the mystery we call God has laid a hand. I am not the only one in this room who has ever sensed a purpose from so deep within ourselves that it felt as if came from without. Nor am I the only one who ever wrestled with my willingness to say yes. Nor will I be the last. But I am also not the only one in this room who senses a dire need for a renewed call, a renewed vocation. In our individual lives, in our family lives, in our national lives, in our global lives, and surely in our denominational and congregational lives, there is a need for someone to speak God's word. It is a word of inclusion, not exclusion, a word of hope, not of despair, it is a word of change, not of business as usual. It is a word that begs to be heard.

Whom shall I send and who will go for us?

And we said?

And Jesus said, ***Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.***

And the result: ***the nets began to break.***

Whom shall I send and who will go for us?

That, as they say, is the question. ***Whom shall I send and who will go for us?***

Jane had the right question. "If not you, then who!"

Isaiah had the right answer. *Here am I; send me!*

What is our answer? What is yours? What is mine?

Only we can answer that call.