

Sermon, February 6, 2022

Isaiah 6:1-8

“Here am I, Send Me”

Some years ago, at least six years before I entered seminary, I felt that God was pulling or pushing me in some direction, although I didn't know what that direction was. Being a member of an Episcopal church at the time, I went to my priest and asked him how someone knew that they were called to the ministry. He said that if I couldn't see myself doing anything else, then that was a pretty clear indication that I was called. Years later when I was in my last year of seminary, there came a time when I found myself wrestling with that same question. Was I up for it? Was God really calling me to become an ordained minister? At that time, I was a student intern at a UCC church in Connecticut, and I went to the pastor who was my supervisor. I told him what the priest had said years before, and the fact that I could still see myself doing other things. Should I take that as sign that I am not called? He replied that the priest was wrong, that there are examples in the Bible of those called by God, responding, but kicking and screaming all the way. Answering the call is not something to be taken lightly, and it is good to wrestle with the question before saying, “Here am I, send me.”

Although he was not exactly kicking and screaming, Isaiah did not see himself as responding to God's question in a positive way - and it is interesting that it was a question rather than a command. God always seems to leave more than one door open to choose which one we will pass through. It is the gift of free will.

Isaiah saw himself as a man of unclean lips, meaning that he was a sinner, and therefore not the right person to speak to his people in a prophetic role. Moses is another example. When God told him to go to Pharaoh and tell him to let his people go, Moses insisted he was the wrong man for the job, that his brother Aaron was far more qualified. Being called to be a spokesperson for God can be a heavy burden.

In terms of ordained ministry, when I found myself having to jump through various hoops, and appear before ministerial committees, it finally dawned on me that it's actually not I who decides if I am called. It is the task of other people to make that decision. It's the same when a congregation decides who is called to be their pastor. Twenty years ago, I was one of two people being considered for the position of Assistant Chaplain to Yale University. I was sure that was what God wanted me to do, but other people decided that was not the case. But God has a way of surprising us in unexpected ways, and I was called to a multicultural church which opened my eyes to the remarkable diversity within the body of Christ.

But God's call is not exclusively for ordination. A foundational concept of Protestantism is called “the priesthood of all believers”. The two great reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin insisted that that is the way the church is called to be. In 1 Peter it is written, “You are a royal priesthood, and a priestly kingdom.” Also, writing to the congregation at Corinth the apostle Paul wrote, “No one should regard us as anything else than ministers of Christ and dispensers of the mysteries of God.” Translation - as believers who have chosen to be followers of Jesus, you too are called! You all are ministers of Christ and respond to that call in many different ways. When you choose to become a member of a congregation, that is, the Body of Christ, in one way or another you are saying, “Here am I, send me.”

Someone once said, "The purpose of life is not to be happy. The purpose of life is to matter; to have it make a difference that you lived at all." Henry David Thoreau said something similar, i.e., "Do not be too moral. You may cheat yourself out of too much life. Aim above morality. Be not simply good; be good for something."

But what does it mean to matter, to be good for something? For some it may mean doing things that alter the course of history or find the cure for some terrible illness- to do something large that effects the lives of many. But those are not the only things that matter. In a sermon entitled "The Practice of Living with Purpose", Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "A parent who spends his or her day changing diapers and scraping applesauce off a toddlers chin can have a hard time remembering that this unpaid work serves the purpose of forming a human being. A laborer for the department of transportation who spends hours pushing hot asphalt into potholes can have a hard time remembering that this work serves the purpose of keeping cars out of ditches on any rainy night."

In other words, whether you do things that affects the lives of many, or act in ways that touches the lives of a few, or even a single person in a positive way, it matters. Isn't that really what Jesus meant when he said we are to love our neighbor? - that is to relate to those we encounter in life in ways that are positive, in ways that truly matter. Isn't that why God calls the church to be, a "royal priesthood" called to care and serve in ways that are positive and uplifting- in ways that matter.

Isaiah felt that he was a sinner and therefore unable to respond to God's call. The simple fact is, we all fall short of the glory of God, but like Isaiah, we are forgiven our sin.(Although, thank God that we are forgiven by his grace, and not by angels flying down and touching our lips with burning coals.) Through such grace we are free to respond to the divine call, and say, "Here am I, send me" that is, send me to do things that matter! Amen.

Let us pray: God of love and mercy, we offer our Thanksgiving for this day, and ask that you help us make the best of it- to do things that matter. Teach us how best to love our neighbor, as we strive to serve in the name of your Son, Jesus. Guide us always we ways that are pleasing to you. We understand that you have called us to be your servants and that the best way to serve you is to serve others. Send us into the world to bear witness to your love in all that we say and do. As always, we. Pray for those who suffer in this world, for the sick and dying, and for those who mourn. Amen.