

Sermon, June 4, 2023

Isaiah 6:1-8

“A Man of Unclean Lips”

In 1979 I was working as a salesperson at an art supply store in Darien, CT. One day I got it in my head that I was going to quit my job and devote myself full time to becoming a starving artist. But first I decided to sit down with my priest, Father Michael, at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, in Vista, NY, and discuss it with him. He did not try to discourage me but suggested that first I should enter a quiet time of prayer and contemplation- and upon his suggestion I drove out to Little Portion Friary, a Franciscan house, on Long Island. The friary was in a beautiful location, with a large, meditative maze leading into a wooded area on one side of the main house, and the shoreline of the Long Island Sound on the other.

The guest house at the time was filled with a group of young people from a nearby church, but I settled into my room, closing myself off from the noise, entering the silence of contemplative prayer. It felt very peaceful at first, but after a while my mind began to fill with the idea that God was calling me into monastic life - a thought that, frankly, scared the hell out of me! I began to have a panic attack, and decided I needed to place a little distance between myself and the friary - so I left my room and ran off into the woods. I'd gone in a ways when I came across something that stopped me dead in my tracks. It was a bright, snow white , image of the crucified Jesus nailed to a tree.

To this day I do not know if it was there, or if it was a vision or a hallucination. What I do know is that it terrified me and sent my anxiety attack into overdrive - an anxiety attack that would last for three months, growing in intensity every day until I was convinced, I was losing my mind. Then one day I gave in - not exactly quoting Isaiah saying , “ Here am I, send me”, but , rather, if it was truly God's will that I become a monk I would go back to Little Portion and ask to be taken in. At that very moment the anxiety burst like a bubble, and I felt myself filling up with the peace that passes all understanding, and at the same time the thought of monastic life floated away like a balloon and was replaced with the idea of becoming a minister of the gospel in a local parish.

In hindsight I recognize that terrifying encounter deep in the woods as a turning point in my life, and the beginning of a journey that would lead to my ordination fourteen years later. Please excuse my vanity, but I share this story with you, because this Tuesday, June 6th, is the 30th anniversary of my ordination.

I'll never know why I was called. Like Isaiah, I was a man of unclean lips and, no doubt, still am. But, as they say, God does work in mysterious ways! I've yet to have an angel touch my mouth with a burning coal...but a few days ago I did burn the roof of my mouth with a hot slice of pizza. Maybe that counts?

Of course, we are all called in one form or another. As it says in 1 Peter, you are a royal priesthood. As a congregation you are called to gather for worship and fellowship. In fact, in the original Greek the word we translate as 'church' is *ecclesia*, which literally means 'a gathered people'. And, as I have said several times before, you are gathered so that you can be sent, so that, again from 1 Peter, "you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light". In other words, you are called as Christians to bear witness to the love of God through both word and deed.

Through the Holy Spirit you are given spiritual gifts. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." Among those spiritual gifts are wisdom, and faith, and healing. Others respond to the call to the church through leadership, cooking and cleaning, through works of mission and the making of music and art.

For most God's calling does not come as words from on high, or from messenger angels, but in the form of given talents. The three wonderful young people that we celebrate today, whether they have discovered them or not, bear talents within them that when allowed to blossom will bring goodness and beauty into the world.

Allowing them to blossom is a very important part of it all. When Isaiah referred to unclean lips, in biblical terms he was referring to sinfulness, which can certainly stop us from responding with all that is within us, but sometimes things like self-doubt, or a lack of self-confidence can also stand in the way, and we have prayed for the faith to move beyond such obstacles. I know that in the years leading up to my ordination I had times when I questioned whether I was truly called to the ministry and considered other career paths. But something always seemed to lure me back.

Another potential obstacle to responding to whatever calling or talents we may have is age. We say, oh, I'm too old to do that, or respond to that. But, again, God's timing is not our timing. I used to have a book that contained stories of people who accomplished great things in their senior years - people like Nelson Mandela, Ben Franklin, Grandma Moses, Mother Teresa, Julia Child, even Colonel Sanders was 65 when he started KFC. I went on Amazon to see if I could find the book again, but I could not remember the exact title; so, I simply typed 'senior citizen achievements'. You know what came up? Books of crossword puzzles! Granted, word games can help us keep our minds sharp. My mother was very much into such games, but in her later

years she also took up quilting, and made dozens of beautiful quilts, some which she gave to friends and family, but, also, many that she donated to a children's hospital.

I have no idea how many more years I have left on this planet, but I'll be damned if I'm going to devote them to crossword puzzles!

God calls us in many ways to bring goodness, beauty, peace, harmony, and love into the world. We just must find the faith to say, "Here am I , send me!" Amen.

Let us pray: Gracious Lord, lover of all creation, we gather today as your Church, and we offer thanksgiving for your Holy Presence and Spirit who binds us together as the Body of Christ. Help us all to be faithful to this calling. Lead us and guide us, support us, and pick us up when we stumble and fall. Grant us the gifts of wisdom and discernment so that we may know your will and respond as your faithful servants, bringing faith, hope , and love into a world very much in need.

On a personal note, I thank you for these past 30 years, for your guidance and support, and ask your forgiveness for those many times that I have not responded to your will in the ways that I should.

Today, we also lift up Mario, Jahir, and Poppy as we honor them for all the hard work, they have done to reach this milestone in their lives. Bless them richly today , and in all the days to follow, that they may truly blossom with the gifts and talents they have within them. Help them to discern the pathways that are open to them, finding inside themselves the faith, the self-confidence, the courage, and determination they will need to bring goodness, beauty, and truth into the world.... Amen.