

“Here I Am, Send Me”

Isaiah 6:1-8 and Luke 5:1-11

September 18, 2011

On a bright, fresh Sunday morning, in a church a little like this one, a man walks into the sanctuary and finds a pew. He’s a man whose business is faltering. It is not in a free fall, not yet, but is struggling enough to keep him working extra hours and lying awake through the night. On the other side of the sanctuary comes a woman who had asked her husband to move out the night before; full of grief at what she’s done and worry about what might be the right next steps. There is a couple who sit holding hands, although she can’t see their linked arms through her tears. They’d lost their third pregnancy that week and all either of them could think about was her phone call to him from the hospital, as such longed for hopes yet again had been crushed. And there is a widower sitting way in the back, who had eaten every meal by himself for a week and wanted more than anything to shake someone’s hand and ask someone at coffee hour, ‘so what did you think of yesterday’s game?’ All of them come into the sanctuary – a place made holy by prayers, hymns, the legacy of others and their other searching faith – to face the altar and again together claim truths they could not prove about a God they could not see.

In the year that King Uzziah died, when the world as he knew it started crumbling in earnest, Isaiah entered into the temple. The ancient temple in old Jerusalem stood at the heart of the city. And the heart of the temple was the ark of the covenant, that sacred box that held the laws of God. Above the ark was the throne, an empty space flanked by two cherubim, a space without idol images that symbolized the hopes of those who came in that sanctuary that somehow right there, God might dwell.

As he looked up at the utterly empty space, the temple opened to a heavenly scene. Isaiah had the most extraordinary vision of God sitting high upon the throne. God is so grand, so vast that all Isaiah can see is the hem of the robe. Faced with the impending destruction of his country, Isaiah gets a theophany, a God-sighting, - although he doesn’t see much of God – that renders him overwhelmed by the holiness of the moment.

When asked, most Christians name love as the prominent trait of God.¹ We tend to stress God’s accessibility, God’s coziness. Yet Isaiah’s vision of God sitting so high above with the tiniest portion of the robe visible, this vision of smoke swirling and seraphs singing so deeply that the whole earth trembles, this vision brings us face to face with the holiness of God.

What does it mean for God to be holy? However much we believe in God’s immanent presence, the holiness of God reminds us that God is also other: inaccessible, mysterious and hidden from our full view. Other than us, God is different than us. God is an outside reality permeating all existence, capable of judging us with a sharpness that dissects truths from lies, and abiding in a set of laws and values that, no matter how much we ignore them, do not change. No matter what we bring to worship, no matter how much we seek the love, it is the holiness we seek also.

¹ Greg Jones, “Faith Matters” in *The Christian Century* 121 no. 3. February 10, 2004.

We are confronted with this wholly other God in what we would describe as holy moments, those times when we bow before the mysteries of life. I could name some of those holy moments and I imagine could you, too.

- Holding my newborn son, amazed at how perfect his little body had been made. At the same time, so scared because his heart was not beating correctly and it was out of my hands.
- Sitting at the bedside of a dying, 38 year old woman, unable to keep my own tears from cascading down my cheeks
- Being at the retirement party of a dear friend, listening to those who had worked with him and loved him talk about the accomplishments of his life. And as I was listening, wondering how to describe what makes a life, what makes a purposeful vocation
- Watching the sun rise on the beach at Rehoboth, bundled up on a winter morning and speechless at the aching beauty of our world

In the face of God's holiness, we can be overwhelmed by the gap between God and us. We are acutely aware of the depth of our dependency upon this God whose hem we can barely touch. We are so far from you, God, so different from your exacting goodness.

Finding himself in God's presence, Isaiah fears for his life. He cries out, "Woe is me. I am lost." His words imply, "I am in danger of dying." Peter's words in front of Christ are almost identical: I am unclean. The holiness of God brings out the broken humanity within each of us. Whenever we truly come into God's presence, we also come into the presence of truths about ourselves.

- I am unclean: In this crazy world full of corruption, violence and decay, I am not so different than anyone else out there.
- I am not worthy: I have done some things I wish I could go back and do differently.
- I am sinful: I get caught up in all the quarrelsome hassles of our world. I honk at bad drivers. I gossip behind people's backs. I hoard all the goods while my neighbor has less and less.

However piercingly honest it feels, speaking the truth of our brokenness before God is also a beautiful thing. Isaiah doesn't know it yet, but in the presence of God the truths we tell about ourselves and our world are transformed into larger, more enduring truths. The winged creature takes a coal – a burning thing from the fire of God – and touches Isaiah's lips. As one preacher said, "That must have hurt." But truths do hurt, don't they? The confessions come out like daggers pulled from our hearts. The tears fall like rivers that will never end. And in it, we are cleansed. That is what the coal symbolized; unclean lips made clean. In this "burning away of the things that keep us from God," we are made ready for whatever holy thing might come next.² One scholar calls this burning of the lips a consecration, a making holy of Isaiah so that his mouth might speak for God.

² The "burning away of the things that keep us from God" is a phrase taken from Paul Tillich's *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953).

It is only with burning lips that Isaiah can hear the voice that has been speaking all around him, like a question that has been crying out for an answer for centuries. Whom shall I send? Who will go for us? The quickness of his response says something of his consecration. Here I am, God, send me.

It is tempting, and somewhat appropriate, to think of this story as one about our individual calls. Isaiah's vision can beg the question: What is my call in life? Where I am supposed to say, Here I am, Lord, send me? At this level, Isaiah's experience does tell us something. Our calls from God don't exist apart from our willingness to be healed. Taking away Isaiah's crushing guilt, God reconnects him to the original, divine holiness that created him in the beginning. In a marvelous sermon on vocation, Rowan Williams suggests that God's calling word cannot be separated from God's creating word. God creates by calling us by name. We answer God's call by saying our names back to God, living out our names in a way that answers God's original intent.

Only you have been called to be you. And by being who you are called to be, you bring God's holy presence into the world. So we imagine Isaiah's vision with an eye towards our own uniqueness. We bring into the sanctuary our deeply cherished dreams, our painful lessons, our life-long questions and ask; "Where, O God, in all of this, are you calling me?"

However, one cannot help but notice that the question God poses is not directed solely at Isaiah. Unlike Jeremiah or Moses, God asks a general question, to no one in particular. Whom shall I send? Who will go for us? It is like God was surveying the landscape, asking again and again who will speak a word of God in a world that is in danger of dying. It is a question for all of us, asked again and again, who will stand and speak for God? Who will stand up in this hurting world and speak the goodness of God.

This is why, I believe, it is important that Isaiah's vision came in a sanctuary. The vision came in the space of corporate worship, as a question to all who search for more of this God we seek but cannot see. If what we do here in worship matters, then our coming together into the sanctuary of God is a time to listen deeply for God's voice. There are, as Frederick Buechner points out, a thousand voices claiming our attention. How easy it is to hear the great blaring, boring, banal voices of mass culture.³ How much we need each other to hear those angels who sing holy, holy, holy and the voice from beyond ourselves, hauntingly insisting that we turn to the world's great need.

I worry sometimes that we don't expect enough from our worship. We do bring our deep, private pains. We do come here searching for community. But we also come expecting little more than the same old, same old. Same bulletin. Same routine. Sit and stand. Stand and sit. If we are lucky, we'll get to sing a hymn we like. Worship is a little morsel to get us through the week. At the level of our souls, all of us are struggling to live; all of us are in danger of dying. The things we bring to worship mirror the world's great need. We know the pain of life. We live it. What would happen if we saw enough of God that our lips

³ Frederick Buechner, "The Calling of Voices" in *Secrets in the Dark: A Life of Sermon* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 36-41.

started burning? What would happen if we felt so compelled by the holiness in our midst that we raised our hands up in the air and said “Here we are. Send us.”

Frederick Buechner imagined it in this way:

“The telephone rings late one night, and you jump out of your skin. You try for a while to pretend it is not ringing, but after a while you answer it because otherwise you will never know who it is, and it might be anyone. Then a voice says, “Listen, something has happened. Something has to be done. I know you are busy. I know you have lots on your mind. But you’ve got to come. For God’s sake.

“Or you are walking along an empty beach toward the end of the day, and there is a gray wind blowing and a seagull with a mussel shell in its beak flaps up and up and then lets the shell drop to the rocks below and there is something so wild and brave and beautiful about it that you have to write it into a poem or paint it into a picture or sing it into a song; or if you are no good at any of these, you have to live out at least the rest of that day in a way that is somehow true to the little scarp of wonder you have seen.”⁴

My friends, I believe that amid all the voices that call us, and all the burdens that distract us, there is a deep, wild place in each of us desperately waiting to be told, Go. For God’s sake go into a world full of despair, emptiness, grief, fear and pain. And I believe there is a call to Go existing for us at Grace Church, a call to take our lives that are hallowed by worship here and make them together speak for God. To give Buechner the last word, “If we keep our eyes and ears open, our hearts open, we will find the place surely. If we keep our lives open, the right place will find us.”

⁴ Buechner, 36.