

Call Waiting
Isaiah 6:1-8
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Kory Wilcoxson

For a book as popular as the Bible, you think it would have more compelling, heroic characters. Usually our bestsellers feature top-secret spies or sword-wielding dragonslayers or at least a teenage wizard with a magic wand. Those kinds of stories sell! And yet, apart from Jesus, who's more of an anti-hero than a traditional one, what the Bible gives us is not Luke Skywalker or James Bond. Instead, we get a collection of whiners. Crybabies. Cowards. Moses balks when confronted by the burning bush. Peter and the disciples turn tail and run rather than stand up for their beliefs. Jonah skeedaddles in the opposite direction when God gives him an assignment. Where's a good hero when you need one?

Don't look to Isaiah. Even though he is the most prolific prophet in the Hebrew scriptures, the start of his journey is a rather inauspicious one. While visiting the temple one day, he sees a heavenly vision complete top-notch special effects like fire and smoke and six-winged seraphs and God on the heavenly throne, and Isaiah's first response is "Woe is me!" Or, in the more modern translation, "Whoa! Me?"

Whoa! Me? Have you ever said that when you were given a call? I know I have. My journey of faith is filled with spiritual potholes where God called me to do something and I started making excuses. If the church had a nickel for every time someone said, "Whoa! Me?" we wouldn't need a stewardship campaign. If you've said that before, you join a long line of faithful people – Moses, Jonah, Peter, Isaiah – who wished they were on God's Do-Not-Call List. How many of us, if we had the choice, would rather not be called by God? Life would probably be a lot simpler. What happened in Isaiah's mind to move him from "Woe is me" to "Send me"?

We learn right away in this passage that Israel is facing a crisis. Their beloved King Uzziah, who had a 52-year reign of peace and prosperity, was now dead. If you remember the turmoil in our country after JFK was assassinated or after 9-11, you get a sense of the upheaval that had taken place with Uzziah's death. Israel knew his much less popular and less successful son Jotham was taking over. Tumultuous times were ahead for God's people, so God needs someone, a messenger, to go to the people and exhort them to stay connected to God, no matter their political leaders do and say.

Enter our unlikely hero, Isaiah, who comes to the temple and has this heavenly vision of the Lord sitting on a throne high and lofty, surrounded by seraphs who were singing God's praises: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The repetition here is significant. In the Bible, if you say something once, it's a statement. If you say something twice, you are putting additional emphasis on it. That's why God often calls people's names twice in order to get their attention: "Moses, Moses!" But if you say something three times, you are making a definitive declaration that can't be refuted. It carries the same gravity of your mom using your middle name: "Kory Thomas!" So what the angels are saying here is that God isn't just holy; God isn't just holy, holy; God is holy, holy, holy! God is the epitome of holiness.

Ever since I took Art Appreciation in college, I've been a huge fan of Vincent Van Gogh. So, a few summers ago, while Sydney and I were in New York City, we went to the Museum of Modern Art, home of Van Gogh's "Starry Night." When I turned a corner and saw it for the first time, I was mesmerized. If you've ever seen a Van Gogh painting in person, you know that he

used so much paint that the image seems three-dimensional. I stood in front of the painting for several minutes, taking in its contrasting colors and swirling patterns.

I would imagine what I felt was just a small microcosm of what Isaiah felt when he stood before God in the temple, listening the angels sing about God's holiness. He was doing then what we are doing now. He was worshipping, which is a great place to start any journey with God. Anything and everything we are called to do has to begin with the acknowledgment that God is the source of all we have and all we are. God is holy, holy, holy, and if we want to succeed in what we do, we start by grounding ourselves in worship of God. If we don't do that, we may start to think that we are the source of holiness, that we are responsible for our own blessings. Worship reminds us it's not about us. Worship is not the end result of what we do as followers of Christ, as if we can leave this place this morning and check something off our to-do list. Worship is the foundational starting point of the sending out, where we invoke God's presence and holiness.

And that's just too much for Isaiah. The majesty of God's holiness is a like a mirror in which Isaiah can see his own sinfulness and he is overcome by guilt. "Woe is me!" he says. He confesses his own uncleanness and that of his people, as if he just knows this fact disqualifies him from doing anything for God. I remember feeling that way when I entered seminary. I felt called to the concept of serving God but had no idea where to do it, how to do it, or if anybody was going to care when I did it. This call from God created in me fears of inadequacy and failure and embarrassment. Woe is me! During orientation, as I sat with other Moses and Isaiahs and Jonahs, one of the senior students addressed the fears he knew we felt when he said to us, "None of us belong here. None of us are prepared to do God's work. But remember this: God doesn't call the equipped; God equips the called."

Isaiah was afraid because he had unclean lips. He was a sinful person called to do the work of God. But God hears his fears and cleanses him, saying, "Your guilt is departed and your sin is blotted out." Isaiah was nowhere near ready to serve God, but God equipped him for service. You see, the call is not dependent upon some level of readiness. There are not criteria of perfection you have to meet in order to be called. In my last church, when I would ask someone to serve as an Elder, I would often get the response, "Gosh, I don't know. I'm not sure I'm worthy of that." Exactly! None of us are worthy of it. That's the whole point of God's grace! God doesn't call us to serve or teach or visit or lead because we've already got it all figured out. If that were a requirement, this place would be empty. God calls us and then provides us the tools we need to do the job. It's an amazing feeling to be forgiven by God, isn't it? But we have to remember we're not just forgiven from sin, we're forgiven for service.

So Isaiah is equipped through his cleansing, and then God says, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Notice a couple things here with me. First, we don't know for sure that God is even speaking to Isaiah. God could be speaking to the angels, brainstorming with them on the best person for the job. And God doesn't even say what the mission is! God could be looking for volunteers to clean clouds or deal with demons or be on prayer-answering duty. We have no idea what the call is, and neither does Isaiah, but that doesn't stop him from thrusting up his hand and saying, "Me! Me! Send me!"

That seems a little rash, doesn't it? I could understand if Isaiah had said, "I'm intrigued by this offer, but I would like to ask some clarifying questions first." Or if he'd said, "Well, I'd like to hear more about the time commitment before I make a decision." But no! He's so overwhelmed with gratitude for God's gift of grace to him that he is utterly compelled to respond

to this call, regardless of what it is. God's grace is worthy of nothing less than an involuntary response of gratitude.

Notice the pattern this passage provides us. Time spent in worship and in God's holy presence leads to recognition of our sins, which leads to a confession, which is followed by a pardon and a call to serve. Each Sunday we come into this time of worship, bringing with us all the baggage we've accumulated over the past week, the things we've done and the things we've left undone. We hear God's word, we sing God's praises, we pour out our hearts to God in prayer. Then we touch to our lips the bread and the cup, the cleansing elements of communion. And then we go from this place, back into the world.

In our tumultuous times, God says, "I need someone to go." Who will go to the rest home and talk to lonely people? Who will sit with the struggling parents of a wayward child? Who will give a ride to the shut-in who has a doctor's appointment? Who will go to the fatherless child or the widow? Who will visit those without hope in prison? Who will tutor the challenging nine-year-old? Who will teach a Sunday School class? Who will go their next-door neighbor? Who will speak up for those without a voice in the halls of power? Who will go to the friend who needs intervention? Who will go? Who will God send? We have been in God's presence, we have received God's goodness, we have been gifted by the Holy Spirit, and we have been called. I don't know what you've been called to do or how you've been called to do it. But God didn't create you to be idle. I know you have been called.

Theologian Soren Kierkegaard tells this parable: A community of ducks waddled a long way on the farm, across the dirt roads, under the fences, through the fields, to the duck church to hear the duck preacher. The duck preacher spoke eloquently of how God has given ducks wings with which to fly. With these wings there was nowhere the ducks could not go, there was no God-given task the ducks could not accomplish. With those wings they had been equipped to soar into the presence of God and do amazing things in God's name. Enthusiastic quacks of "Amen!" echoed throughout the congregation. At the conclusion of the service, the ducks left, commenting on how inspiring the message had been, how much it meant to them to hear it. And then they waddled all the way back home.

Isaiah would go on to be one of the most important figures in Jewish history. Not all of us will become so famous when we answer our call. We might not change thousands of lives. Maybe not even hundreds. But we might change one. God has given us the opportunity to join God in working together in this world. Do we say, "Whoa? Me!?" Our worship will be ending soon. We could just waddle back home. Or we could fly.