

Call Waiting
Isaiah 6:1-8
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James Bond. Jack Ryan. Sherlock Holmes. What do all these have in common? None of them are in the Bible. But I kinda wish they were. 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. 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 Conan the Barbarian. 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?

Well, 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 with 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. And, these days, it feels like it's more difficult than ever for us to find lay leaders willing to step forward. 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. And yet, we're not called to live simple lives, but meaningful ones. What happened in Isaiah 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 in Israel 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 keep their eyes on God, no matter how much their political leaders screw up

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 as your mom using your middle name. 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.

And in the presence of such holiness, there is only one appropriate response. Actually, it's what we're doing now. We are 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 holy, holy, holy, 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 as we go to serve.

And all this is 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 listen 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, "You don't belong here. 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 is not criteria of perfection you have to meet in order to serve. In my ministry, when I have asked someone to serve as a deacon or elder or ministry team chair, I 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. 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 a response of gratitude and a raised hand for service.

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 then 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 is saying, "I need someone to go." Who will go to the assisted living facility 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 mom and kids fleeing domestic abuse? Who will visit those without hope in prison? Who will tutor the struggling teenager? Who will teach a Sunday School class? Who will check in on their next-door neighbor? Who will speak up for those without a voice at the city council meeting? 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 across the farm, waddling down the dirt roads, waddling under the fences, waddling through the fields, waddling into 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 these 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, how blessed they were to have been given wings. And then they waddled 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!?" Or "Send me?" Our worship will be ending soon. We could just waddle back home. Or we could fly.