

Sunday January 9
 Lesson 6: Coming Into God's Presence
 Scripture: Isaiah 6: 1-13

Context:

The winter Adult Bible Studies Curriculum continues its focus on engaging the world with the unit entitled "Wonder." This set of lessons in the season of Epiphany will focus on how we are called to a sense of wonder in our faith. As we look to the glory of God, we are transformed and can engage in the world in new ways as disciples of Jesus. Today we will focus on how God calls us to respond affirmatively to the call placed on our lives.

The text for the day comes from the book of Isaiah, a book in the Old Testament. Isaiah is one of the better known prophets and has one of the longest books in the Old Testament. This collection of writings is full of prophecies, oracles, exhortation, and revelations.

Today's text tells the call story of Isaiah found early in the book. The setting is at the time of the death of King Uzziah. Earlier in the book, we learn the setting is the eighth century, perhaps from 740 to 700 B.C.¹ This was an especially tumultuous time in the history of Israel as there were two historical events occurring: the attempt by the Northern Kingdom and Syria to force Ahaz of Judah to join their coalition and the 701 B.C. invasion by Sennacherib of Assyria, during the reign of Hezekiah.² As such, Isaiah and those contributing to the book, such as the scribes and historians, would have been facing challenging times where there was chaos and instability.

The prophet Isaiah comes as part of a line of call stories in the Bible. Of the two forms of call narratives in the Old Testament, Isaiah's call appears as part of a theophany as God comes to him in a vision and there is a prophetic commissioning within the framework of a throne scene.³ This stands out in contrast to other call narratives where the word of God comes to those called, such as Moses, Gideon, and Jeremiah.⁴ God brings Isaiah before the throne and in glory, God gives Isaiah the call utilizing ritual as a seraph touches Isaiah with coal to purge his lips and cleanse him. He is set apart from the unclean nature of the nation and he is forgiven. He is free to step forward to do what God has called him to do.

After the ritual, God gives instructions on the call to take the people on and to continue to preach to them. When Isaiah asks for how long, the ominous reply of the Lord is to do so until nothing is left. Yet a seed will be planted to be nurtured and will grow even as it sits in a stump.

¹ Seitz, Christopher R. "Isaiah 1-39." *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012), 11.

² Ibid., 12.

³ Ibid., 54.

⁴ Ibid.,

Application

Call stories can be simultaneously empowering, terrifying, and moving. Throughout scripture, there are numerous call stories from Moses and the burning bush to Saul/Paul and his conversion on the road to Damascus after being blinded by a light and hearing a voice. Whether they involve the Word of God or a theophany, we are mesmerized by how God has spoken to humanity for ages.

Unfortunately for today, call stories are often relegated to clergy and how they discern the call to ordained ministry. While extremely beautiful and important for the church to hear and discern how God has called someone to serve in ministry in specific offices with particular gifts, I think call stories have a wider sphere. Calling is not just for clergy; a calling happens for all the people of God and all as part of the priesthood of believers are given a role to play.

The author Fredrick Buechner once wrote of how calling and vocation can be explained for all of us. He states, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.”⁵ I can pinpoint this to my own call to ministry. Unlike Isaiah’s call, mine did not start in a throne room with a vision from God. Mine began in a multiuse parlor/Sunday school room of a small membership church in a rural community with a confirmation mentor who was an angel of sorts, but not like the terrifying ones described in the book of Isaiah. There were questions and answers and dialogue. And of course there was running and protesting on my part. Yet God did what God does and led me to the local church as a minister of the gospel where I have the privilege to preach and teach the holy scriptures, preside and shepherd people receiving the sacraments, order the life of the church, and then encourage the church to go out and embrace the world.

Yet one of the things I love about our discipline in the United Methodist Church is how my call as an ordained Elder does not supersede or diminish the call of those around me. I think of my colleagues who are called to the Order of Deacons and who can point to how God has called them to Word, Service, Justice, and Compassion. And then I think of my colleagues who are called to be Local-Licensed Pastors and how while similar, their calling is a bit different than mine in some ways and yet we serve together. Then, I think about the laity in my congregations and I marvel at how their calling plays out.

Did you even know there is a section in *The Book of Discipline* about the calling of laity? All those who are laity are also in ministry as they are called to be missional, living as Christ-like examples and sharing of their own faith experiences of the gospel.⁶ Laity in our churches are ministers as well, on the frontlines.

I see every day how laity use their calling to live out the witness. It’s the

⁵ Buechner, Fredrick., *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC*, (New York: Harper One, 1993), 118-119.

⁶ See ¶ 126 of *The United Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* 2016.

teacher who works in the school system and grows tired of seeing the lack of nutritious food in a rural food desert and helps begin a food pantry. It is the medical community helping their pastors navigate a pandemic and giving consultation about the best ways to worship and be safe. It is the youth who invites their friends to church because they want them to find the love and acceptance they have found there as well. (And the occasional feeding of pizza also helps.)

All of us have a calling and God invites all of us to respond with a “yes.” The story of Isaiah reminds us of how God can use anyone in any time or place to lead and serve. What a joy when we hear our call and realize God made one of us for such a time as this.

How has God called you to serve and be in God’s kingdom? What gifts has God given you to share? Why is it important to remember all are called and not just ordained clergy? Who has helped you discern God’s call on your life to whatever it is you are doing now? How do you help others discern God’s call on their lives?

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