

“Be Careful What You Volunteer For”
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Our scripture for this morning is among the more famous in the Old Testament. More than a few hymns have their origin in these verses. Dan Schuette’s 1981 song, “Here I Am, Lord,” which we just sang, being just one of the more popular ones.

You might stop and consider how many times you have heard the now cliché phrase, “Here I am, send me” in the church as pastors, sessions, church reader boards and banners are all insistent to urge congregants to respond to the call of the gospel.

If you have learned anything about my personality so far, you might not be surprised to know I shy away from clichés—especially around the church. So what I want to do this morning is to break open our text a bit so that we can see it in its complexity and therefore, I think, in its relevance for those of us faithful, yet perhaps weary, volunteers still showing up at church through all of the decline and seismic shifts happening within our mainline church today.

The first way I want to break this passage open for us is by way of contrast. The prophet Isaiah is by no means the first or the only person in the Old Testament to have a call narrative, much less one that includes the words, “Here I am.”

- Remember Abraham in Genesis 22: “... God tested Abraham, and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here am I.”
- And Jacob in Genesis 46: “God spoke to Israel in a vision at night and said, “Jacob! Jacob!” “Here I am,” he replied.
- There’s Moses in Exodus 3: “God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!” And Moses said, “Here I am.”
- And, of course, we can’t forget the famous call story of Samuel: “A third time the Lord called, “Samuel!” And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.” Then Eli realized that the Lord was calling the boy. 9 So Eli told Samuel, “Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place. 10 The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, “Samuel! Samuel!” Then Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

Did you decipher the contrast of Isaiah’s call experience with that of Abraham, Jacob, Moses and Samuel? Here it is: Isaiah is not called. Nope. He simply volunteers. God doesn’t call him by name from a bush. God is not testing him like Abraham. Like Jacob, Isaiah has a vision, but it is not one in which God initiates conversation with Isaiah. Unlike Samuel, Isaiah is not pursued by God three times. Isaiah, it appears, is an eager-beaver, shouting, in effect, to God, “pick me, pick me” when he hears God searching for a volunteer.

I want to come back to this point but before breaking open this text in two more ways.

So now let's go back to the opening words of our text. How does it begin? "In the year that King Uzziah died." However different Isaiah's volunteer-based call story is, it is still a call story and one that, significantly, begins with a death. It begins, in other words, in a traumatic time. The stability the people had from a long-serving king has just ended. And to top it off, things are not at all right in the world. The death of the king, and the loss of stability for the people, is set against a backdrop of terror being inflicted by the Assyrian Empire. Instability. Death. Destruction. Trauma. Turmoil. All of this hangs over not only the people but Isaiah himself.

And so just imagine what it must have been like for Isaiah to receive a vision of the Holy God breaking into the pain and the turmoil to offer both a word of warning to doers of injustice and a word of hope to those being oppressed by the death-dealing forces of empires and those shaken by a loss of stability.

In the midst of so many cataclysmic events, Isaiah's vision shows God sitting on a grand throne with seraphs attending and singing God's praises. Isaiah's vision isn't just for show. Isaiah vision brings healing and hope. God is the Eternal Ruler, the Lord of Host, whose reign of justice and love offers a sharp contrast to the transience of earthly rulers and their wheeling-and-dealings. Terror and violence and death and destruction will come and go with the rise and fall of empires. But God will reign forever. Maybe we can begin to understand a bit of why Isaiah felt so compelled to respond when God needs a volunteer. Perhaps he was so in awe of God and so heartened to remember that even though Jerusalem was destroyed, even though the king had died, Holy God's powerful reign of justice and love will never end, will be shaken.

One final way to break this passage open is to push past the convenient place the lectionary cuts off the passage at verse 8. When we end our reading at verse 8, we can imagine that Isaiah is so filled with hope when he remembers who God is that he energetically volunteers to be sent by God, even though God never asked him to go. When we stop at verse 8 we can write the end of the story: that it all works out well—the people listen, the message is restorative, and Isaiah is fulfilled.

But if we read on to verses 9-13, we are prevented from creating such a neat story. Listen to Isaiah 6:9-13

9 God said, "Go and tell this people:
"Be ever hearing, but never understanding;
be ever seeing, but never perceiving."
10 Make the heart of this people calloused;
make their ears dull
and close their eyes.
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,

understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.”
11 Then I said, “For how long, Lord?”
And he answered:
“Until the cities lie ruined
and without inhabitant,
until the houses are left deserted
and the fields ruined and ravaged,
12 until the Lord has sent everyone far away
and the land is utterly forsaken.
13 And though a tenth remains in the land,
it will again be laid waste.
But as the terebinth and oak
leave stumps when they are cut down,
so the holy seed will be the stump in the land.”

These verses reveal a very different story, don't they. Isaiah, the eager-beaver, so unlike a figure like Moses, who is full of excuses, seems eager to bring a message to people with whom he identifies. There must have been a deep pathos in Isaiah for his people. But imagine how his heart must have raced when he volunteers before knowing what his job assignment really is, only then to discover that God has a challenging and deeply uncomfortable message for him to share!

God's command for this eager, energetic volunteer must have been devastating. The prophet is demanded by God to speak in such a way that no one will finally understand what it is he is saying. Their eyes and ears will be useless, so dull and sightless that their minds will be clouded with confusion. As a result, their healing will be delayed. What Isaiah is called to do, what he didn't know that he'd volunteered for, will not make their lives easier, their road smoother, or their responsibilities plainer. Everything will be more confusing and less certain. It will be more difficult to perceive just what it is that God wants from the people.

Not surprisingly, that eager volunteer of the lectionary passage, so ready to follow the mighty Lord of the temple, so anxious to do divine work, now sounds a very different note, after hearing what God has in mind for him. Instead of “here am I,” Isaiah bleats, “how long, O Lord?” God's message, Isaiah discovers, has very little to do with survival. It has very little to do with success.

What are we to make of this as weary but committed church volunteers? Here's one idea: Following God rightly does not always lead to great congregations, booming budgets, elaborate business plans, or the perfect marketing strategy for capturing new members. Maybe God wants us, just like God wants Isaiah, to step up to the plate and address the spiritual problem of God's people.

Just as God did back in Isaiah's time, so still today, God cares deeply when God's people forget and forsake who God has called them to be do. In Isaiah's day, God found their

worship futile, their leadership broken, and greed having such a foothold that injustice was rampant. What might God determine about the mainline church today? What about our church? Is there a gap between who we are and what God is calling us to do?

I discovered something incredible in my study of Isaiah this week. Isaiah, whether he wanted it or knew what he was doing, was put in a place that only one other volunteer in scripture was ever in. There is only one other person in scripture who answered “here I am” to a call that was not extended: God. God! In Isaiah 65 God says, “I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, “Here I am, here I am” to a people that did not call on my name.” Wow!

Like Isaiah, and like God, the mainline church, and yes, our little church, full as we are of dedicated yet weary volunteers, must confront the reality that true proclamation, true “work” that God calls us to do, is not towards the end of finding positive responses to our ministry and commitments. What God calls us to will not necessarily lead to “church growth” or even “survival,” especially in a numerical sense. When we volunteer for God, we cannot necessarily expect that people will listen or buy into the vision. Outward success is not the goal. Faithfulness to God is.

This is a challenging word. It reminds us that when it comes to being God’s people, when it comes to volunteering, serving, and leading, when and as we find ourselves energetic to respond to what God is up to, we must do so with integrity.

So by all means, respond, like Isaiah, to God’s search for volunteers. Volunteer again and again. Don’t give up being faithful. But be careful to know that the call is never easy, never simple to grasp, never designed for ready comfort and success. May we always remember what God requires of us: doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God. Amen.