

February 7, 2010: CALLED TO FAILURE
Isaiah 6:1-13; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Psalm 138
Springwater Presbyterian Church -- Eileen Parfrey

Ten years ago this weekend the weather was unseasonably warm in Madison, Wisconsin. I know this, because I was so relieved that the four visitors from Oregon wouldn't freeze. They were in Wisconsin as witnesses to my ordination as Minister of Word and Sacrament. It was a monumental event requiring a cast of thousands over a period of 6 years to get me to the moment in time when I knelt in front of God and everybody. Several hundred people were in attendance—John Knox and Cascade Presbyteries, my internship and home churches, the church to which I was called; fellow deacons and work campers, ministry groups for folks with disabilities; musicians, construction workers, seminary buddies, professors. Even my family came! I experienced the sense of dismay Isaiah must have felt when, in the midst of "Holy, holy!" a burning coal was placed on his lips. Isaiah had no idea what his "yes" had gotten him into, any more than two people do when they tell each other, "I do." Ordination is no more "ministry" than a wedding is marriage.

I've always wondered if Isaiah was naïve when the words "Here I am, send me" so blithely tripped off his tongue. He doesn't ask "where" or "what are we gonna do" or "how will I know when I get there." He volunteers, and *then* he gets an earful of God's dreadfulness mission for him. Maybe Isaiah's "yes" was an honest desire to please God. Perhaps it was like Jeremiah's, a case of "I can't *not*." Maybe, as it usually is for us, it was a mixture of both. That's comforting to know when we teeter over our own "yes" to God—or when we regret our consent or want to whine about what we just took on.

What Isaiah discovered when he consented to lead Israel during this transitional time in their history was that he had to go first. He could not lead Israel where he had not himself already gone. Elders, deacons, Sunday School teachers, parents, grandparents, kids who are looked up to by the younger kids—this applies to you. These are all calls to leadership. When you say "yes" to God's call to lead, it behooves you to maintain your own spiritual journey, your own relationship with God.

Isaiah also discovered that answering God's call wouldn't win him any popularity contests. The people he was supposed to lead would often mistrust and resent him, would blame *him* when they were mad at God. And of course, God would ask him to do more than he was capable of doing. Sound familiar? Welcome to ministry in the church.

If you read ahead in Isaiah, you know that his call changes over time, depending on Israel's position and needs. Ranging from assurance to accountability to judgment to comfort, Isaiah does not have the luxury of staying the same or always proclaiming the same message. Literary-critical scholars tell us that the person we call "Isaiah" was more than one writer—at least two persons, probably four, and maybe an entire school of prophets. But multiple authorship is beside the point in the shifting call. That "Isaiah" might have in actuality been a succession of prophets in a continuous prophetic line might actually make this passage more pertinent to

us. In a macro sense, we are a church in reformation. We've gotta change because the culture is changing. But on a more personal level, we are a small congregation. We love to dream. As one of our elders is wont to say, we have more ideas than we have time or energy to accomplish them. The consequence of this quirk of ours is that none of us can bring to completion the immensity of either what we dream up or what God calls us to do. We need to temper the implications of that reality with a genuine accountability, both to each other and to our calls. We are only a small part of God's plan, and the accomplishment of God's plan does not rest solely and completely on our shoulders. But we are called to *act* as if it does. Accountability.

Humility is a prerequisite for this. Isaiah's cry of woe when he realizes he's in the presence of the holy gets a little lost in the translation. "Woe!" has more meaning to it in Hebrew than the English conveys. "Woe! I'm lost!" means more like, "I'm destroyed and brought to silence, because I really am made in the likeness of God and I haven't always lived up to that." Isaiah is telling a truth about humans, that the experience of the holy and mystical is like that. For Isaiah to admit to having unclean lips isn't a confession of sin. His assessment of "unclean" means he's aware of his lack of ritual readiness. "I'm not prepared for this," he says.

Thus, it is all the more poignant when Isaiah so readily accepts God's call and then hears that he is called to failure. Punishment for Israel is not inevitable at this point. Israel could have repented, gone back to faithful practices, and maybe the exile could have been avoided. The faith conveyed to us would have been different—perhaps less portable, more geographically located—but punishment was not a foregone conclusion. Isaiah knew that going in, which must have made his failure to convince them to repent seem all the harder. Sometimes our idea of "success" is more limited than God's.

But boy oh boy, look what happens in the midst of "Holy!" It's no coincidence that Isaiah's call happens in the context of worship. It's no wonder we need to read today's text from 1 Corinthians, or we might think this would never happen to us, this worshipful awe morphing into call. The text in 1 Corinthians is "the gospel according to Paul," and it includes all the parts of the Jesus story *he* thinks are important. So of course he includes the logical conclusion, "I the least of the sent ones," his version of "Woe! I am lost!" This is neither humble pie nor a simple statement of fact. This is a full-on embrace of God's grace, since the very next thing Paul says is, "I am who I am by God, called to be and do who I am by grace." Humility means telling the truth—an acknowledgment of God's activity and of the call that makes upon our gifts. Wouldn't it be fabulous if we could all say what Paul says? What if we could confidently say, "I trust God to use *me* for who I am. I trust that my gifts—whatever they are—are important to God's work *because they are my gifts.*" How would our lives be different if we *really* believed that—and acted like we believed?

I ran across this aphorism: "We are all chosen; we just forget to RSVP." What we can learn from Isaiah is that call begins in worship, in the awe of mystery. Someone I read this week¹ said the mystical comes out of surprise and effort. It's a paradox of showing up prepared but still finding oneself unprepared and surprised.

¹ Bruce Epperly, www.processandfaith.org/lectionary/YearC/2009-2010-2-07

It's that daily showing up for God, expecting nothing, ready for everything. It is being both empty-handed and anticipatory. That holy mystery often requires more of us than we anticipate, because its call upon us is both invitation and command. "Whom shall I send?" really only has one answer. We're never ready for God's surprise, but by faithfully showing up we develop the equipment to recognize it—even if it's only in retrospect. We're never ready for God, but God does call. Maybe we should expect bigger and greater things in worship. Maybe we should come to worship expecting to meet Mystery, to claim our roles as God's partners in sharing the good news. We can resist God's call, but we will not be whole until we answer God and become what God created us to be and do.

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