

“Success or Mastery”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 8:12-17

Richard E. Otty
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Trinity/Confirmation Sunday

We don't know much about Isaiah. His call would be more dramatic if he was sleazy or corrupt, and suddenly was transformed to be a prophet for God. If he had been an ordinary olive farmer who had a vision during a harvest, his story might have been a feature segment in the news. Yet, all we know is Isaiah's father was Amoz; yet, in Jewish tradition, Amoz is considered to be a brother of King Amaziah, making Isaiah linked to royalty. So, there is a potential for a news headline: Man of privilege says God has called him to challenge kings unwilling to fully trust God. The headline would likely be in the tabloids at the checkout counter.

Our reading in Isaiah this morning comes after five chapters of prophecy, when the prophet stops to recount his call to be a prophet. It was not a voice from the heavens or a blinding light, but a vision in the Jerusalem temple. Initially, Isaiah only cries out to confess his sin and that of the nation, but then he hears God ask, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” And as they say, the rest is history, or in this case prophecy, as he utters his famous words, “Here am I. Send me!”

Let's share the call of Isaiah responsively, with you as the congregation reading the prophet's spoken responses – the first a confession, and the second his acceptance of God's call to go, after a particularly searing assurance of forgiveness.

In the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah saw God sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of God's robe filled the temple. Winged creatures were in attendance above God; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of God's glory.”

The doorframe shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. Isaiah said:

“Woe is me!

**I am lost, for I am a person of unclean lips,
and I live among a people of unclean lips;
yet my eyes have seen the Sovereign, the God of hosts!”**

Then one of the winged creatures flew to Isaiah, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. Isaiah's mouth was touched with it and the winged creature said to him:

“Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.”

Then Isaiah heard God's voice asking,

“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”

Isaiah said,

“Here am I; send me!”

On Trinity Sunday, the Holy Spirit is celebrated as the third essence of the God we know as Creator, and the God we have seen in Jesus as Redeemer. The Spirit fulfills Jesus' promise of God's continued presence, to sustain and comfort, guide and prod the church and believers.

Our lesson in Romans 8 speaks of the Spirit as bringing us into relationship with God, using the word adoption to mark us as children of God and siblings of Christ. As I wrote that, I thought about what it would be like to have Jesus as a sibling, and attending high school after him. Many who had an older brother or sister who excelled in classes or sports, felt a pressure from either parents or teachers to live up to their sibling's accomplishments. Imagine having Jesus as the older brother! We'd probably be told to wear a bracelet that had the letters, WWJD, meant to remind us to ask always, "What would my older brother do?" Now, I know the point is to center us on Christ's way, but I think it might be better for the letters to be WWJHMD – "What would Jesus have me do?"

Paul connects our being children of God with the word "heirs", putting us in line to receive the benefits, the inheritance, of the Spirit. While we mark being part of God's family at our baptisms, even as infants, when we profess our faith, as our confirmation class has done, it marks our own commitment to follow the call of Christ.

Let us hear Paul's words to the church in Rome, Romans 8:14-17:

¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" ¹⁶it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

Caller ID allows us to screen calls, and not answer if we so choose. We even have talking caller ID so we don't have to get up and check the phone for who is calling. Some biblical leaders used their own kind of caller ID to screen out God's call. When, God called Moses to lead the people of Israel, Moses told God,

"No can do, God! I have a problem speaking. You have the wrong man."

Of course, God said, "Yes, can do, Moses. I'll have your brother Aaron help with the speaking. You are the right man."

Jeremiah took a similar tack when called to speak God's word of judgment on his own people.

"No can do, God! I am just a boy and no one will listen to me. Best to find someone older."

Of course, God said, "Yes, can do, Jeremiah. I'll put the words in you and people will listen. Age is not a factor."

Isaiah is unique among the prophets in that he seems to volunteer for duty, for while his declaration he is a man of unclean lips might be heard as an excuse, it is actually a confession. I do think it wise to note his assurance of forgiveness is much more dramatic and painful than our own, as the seraph, a winged creatures pulls a hot coal out of a fire and touches it to the prophet's unclean lips and declares him forgiven! Imagine if you came into the sanctuary this morning, having read this passage, and finding a live charcoal grill and tongs!

The cleansing prepares Isaiah to hear God's call, and with a simple yet profound response, the prophet says, "Here am I. Send me. I am your man." God then says, "Go." Isaiah is sent.

It is not only the church that speaks of call, though we tend to add God language. We ask, "How is God calling me?" We also understand the idea of call is not just for individuals, so particularly in transition times, a congregation asks, "How is God calling us?"

It is also not only the church that talks about gifts, though again, we generally label the source of gifts as being "God-given." We might ponder, "With what gifts has God entrusted me?" or, "With what gifts has God entrusted our church?"

It is not only the church that encourages us to follow our call, find our gifts, or discover our passion. There is a more universal idea shared within our culture that our lives are more fulfilling if we are able to find and tap into our gifts, our passions, our calls.

Finding our gifts and following passions sounds wonderful, but I am going to guess more than one of us here today has experienced a tinge, or even a flood of guilt over this idyllic view of how life should be, because we have not experienced it as imagined. One expression of guilt is an expression of regret, with someone looking back on her or his life and saying, "I was so busy building a career, raising a family, making a million dollars, that I never stopped to consider the gifts with which God had entrusted me or what really moved me, at how I was being called or what truly aroused my passion – what I truly loved doing – and now I regret not taking the time."

The second form of guilt is not an expression of regret for not seeking, but of despair at not finding. It too may be someone looking back on her or his life and saying, "I have spent my whole life trying to discover the gifts God had given me and what really moved me, at how I was being called and what truly aroused my passion – what I truly loved doing – and I never found them."

As the confirmation class is recognized this morning, it marks a passage into a new day of discipleship, of seeking to follow Jesus Christ, and listening for his call. It also offers each of us the opportunity to examine our own professions of faith, our commitments to follow Jesus Christ by word and deed, and how the Spirit uniquely gifts us and calls each of us. Yet, as we seek God's call, as new disciples and old alike, we are wise to remember it will not likely be as dramatic as Isaiah's, and guilt lodged in either regret or despair may impair our searches.

Yes, I would love to have more, "Here am I, Lord," moments, when the call was clear and I would have the certainty to respond, "God, send me." Yet, if we are waiting for that, we may miss what I believe are more subtle, everyday callings of the Spirit, such as offering a welcoming word to a newcomer others have already rejected as unpopular, or speaking a word of justice for a coworker being treated unfairly, or refusing to be silent when someone tries to group all Muslims together as terrorists. I think such times are also "Here am I, Lord," moments. "Here I am, Lord. Speak through me, act in me."

In an interview on the Fresh Air radio program, actress and writer Maria Bello told about a friendship she had made with a priest at Villanova University, from whom she had taken a peace and justice course. [Fresh Air, May 27, 2015, transcript found at: <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=409981698>] The two hit it off, frequently lunched together, and while they differed on religious doctrine, they shared a passion for social justice, and peace, and eliminating poverty. In the interview she says, "I was on track to be a woman's rights attorney working at the Women's Law Project in Philadelphia. And then I took an acting class and I knew that's what I was supposed to do and I went to [Father Jackson] in tears and said, 'Father, I don't know what to do. I thought I was supposed to be of service in this world and acting seems like such a selfish profession.' And he said the words that would set me free. He said, 'Maria, you serve best by doing the things you love most' – and I got it."

"You serve best by doing the things you love most." This may be a help to us in identifying our God-given gifts by understanding the source of our search is within our reach. We often think of God's direction, the Spirit's call as coming from outside us; yet, perhaps it is also dwelling within, seeking to become clear by having us ponder the things we love most.

The title of this sermon comes from a TED talk entitled, "Embrace the Near Win," given last year by Sarah Lewis. She speaks of "near wins" as offering us incentive to keep trying, but I was more intrigued by her differentiation of success and mastery. [Sarah Lewis, TED talk, "Embrace the Near Win," transcript found at: https://www.ted.com/talks/sarah_lewis_embrace_the_near_win/transcript?language=en]

We often speak of success and have a sense of what that means, either by pursuing a certain profession or career, or receiving an honor or recognition, or having financial well-being. In almost all cases, such success is linked to how others regard us, or how our culture views our profession or accomplishments. By contrast, mastery involves gifts and desires we sense within ourselves, which do not require affirmation from others because we feel it within us.

We use the terms master plumber and masterpiece theater. We speak of art masterpieces and a masters degree. Athletes can master a sport, musicians an instrument, dancers a ballet. One might even think of one who masters a video game, or Will Shortz, who is called a puzzlemaster. What all share in common is a commitment to, and a passion for what they do.

Sarah Lewis said, "Mastery is not ... the same as success, which I see as an event, a moment in time, and a label that the world confers upon you. Mastery is not a commitment to a goal but to a constant pursuit. The pursuit of mastery, in other words, is an ever-onward almost...Mastery is in the reaching, not the arriving. It's in constantly wanting to close that gap between where you are and where you want to be. Mastery is about sacrificing for your craft and not for the sake of crafting your career."

When I heard this TED talk repeated several weeks ago, I thought about the confirmation class beginning a new stage of their discipleship journey, and it occurred to me we are wise not to measure discipleship by success and goals achieved, but by that “ever-onward almost” quest Sarah Lewis links to mastery. In fact, I realized one could substitute “discipleship” for “mastery” in part of her talk, so that we understand discipleship is not a commitment to a goal but to a constant pursuit. Discipleship is in the reaching, not the arriving. Discipleship is in constantly wanting to close that gap between where you are and where you want to be.

Isaiah had a grand call and certainly a legacy. Yet, hearing the call of God, being alert to the teachings of Jesus, sensing the leading of the Spirit, is rarely so dramatic. We needn't be on an endless search for a great call, or even receiving dramatic signs of the gifts with which God has entrusted us.

A masters in discipleship is not a degree earned, but a passion lived under the guiding presence of God's Spirit, which will guide us through challenge and difficulty as well as accompany us into joy. Each day, the Spirit reminds us not to be guided by what the world deems to be success, but by the things we love doing. This itself is a gift of the Spirit. This is the call of Christ to follow. Here I am. Thank you, God, for giving me something I love to do, and sending me to do them.