

Who Will Go for Us? (Isaiah 6:1-13)

The Old Testament reading this morning is the introduction to the sixth chapter of *Isaiah*. The first eight verses deal with God's call to Isaiah, God's call to be a prophet to Israel. Biblical scholars refer to these verses as Isaiah's call statement. This is Isaiah's account of his encounter with God as he is called into ministry. The encounter leads up to an important question on God's part. "Whom shall I send?" "Who will go for us?"

Isaiah's holy encounter with the divine seems at first to be anything but holy. He describes God as "... sitting on a throne — high and lifted up" — the train of God's robes filling the Temple. He sees angel-seraphs hovering above him, each with six wings. With two of these wings they cover their faces, with two more wings they cover their feet, and with the last two wings they are flying. The scene Isaiah describes is every bit as scary as it is holy!

Isaiah believes he has come face to face with God. But notice that his description is not of God but of the train of his robes and the winged angels that proclaim the encounter as holy and not just scary. Isaiah's encounter is with a veiled God because no one can ever see God.

But even this veiled God is enough to scare Isaiah out of his wits. He hears the angels proclaim — "holy, holy, holy." And he feels the very foundation of creation shaking beneath his feet as the temple fills with smoke.

Even veiled, the awesome nature of God commands Isaiah's attention.

He realizes he is being called by God — called to a difficult task. Isaiah is called to a prophetic ministry of hope with Israel. But the Israelites are still being held captive in Babylon. How could anyone provide hope for a broken and scattered people?

Isaiah would probably choose to run far, far away to escape God's call. But he can't escape this awesome display of holiness. So Isaiah does the next best thing. He argues with God, attempting to make the point that he is not worthy of God's call. But then who among us could ever be worthy of God's call. Please pray with me.

Gracious and loving God you are awesome in your presence. You are awesome in your presence revealed to us in Jesus Christ. You are the one true God, our God. We know you call us to different tasks, to different destinations, to different vocations. But in the end we know that you call each us to the one ministry of Jesus Christ. Help us to stand our ground in your awesome presence and respond to your call by saying — Send Me!

I have a very dear pastor friend. Several years ago we worked together at her church. She was my supervising pastor at the time as I was completing my Masters in Divinity at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. I had the opportunity to work closely with

her for two years. I first knew her as teacher, later as mentor, and then as friend.

I learned a great deal from her in our short time together. The most important thing I learned had a profound affect on my call to ministry. She truly believes that she was called to ordained ministry when she was about six years old. "I knew from the time I was a very little girl that all I wanted to do was to be a minister," she once wrote in a newsletter article. This congers up images of a little girls baptizing her dolls and serving Holy Communion to the kids in the neighborhood.

God calls us all to ministry in some way or another. Knowing the story of my pastor-friend we could probably conclude that all encounters with God's call aren't as stressful as Isaiah's.

When my friend was old enough to began pursuing ordained ministry as vocation, the United Methodist Church was not particularly interested in encouraging women on toward ordination. In fact, by the time she was eighteen years of age, our denomination had only been ordaining women for ten years.

While her call may have been clear and significantly less traumatic compared to Isaiah's call, the path to ordained ministry and beyond was not an easy one for her. Twenty-five years later she found herself mentoring me – a second career pastor.

I shared with the pain and struggle I had to deal with in answering God's call with my friend. I had a great life. I was making a lot of money. I was traveling around the world. But I knew that God was calling me to give back something – to begin to sacrifice a part

of my life that had been so greatly blessed.

Like Isaiah, I argued with God. Every time I felt the call to fulltime ministry I debated with God. My plan had always been to work until I would be comfortable for the rest of my life and to then begin giving back to God. But I soon realized that this was not what God had in mind for me. God spoke to me saying, "This call is in my time and on my terms – not on your time and your terms. I have always taken care of you. You need to trust me and respond – now – not in your time but in mine."

Like Isaiah, I continued to argue. My thought was that I was not worthy. That idea, I decided, would surely let me escape God's call. But in the end God prevailed and I gave in. I quit my twenty-five year-long career and entered the seminary.

It was a struggle every day to give up what I loved doing – to return to school after twenty-five years. My initial response to God's call was to go "kicking and screaming" into vocational ministry. And that was the way it was – until I met my friend.

When I confided in her that I my call was a struggle, her response was not so pastoral. "You second career people really burn me," she said. I have known since I was a little girl that I wanted to be a pastor. It was my passion – all I ever wanted." Apparently for her, there were no ring bells or lightening strikes, just the desire to be a pastor from the earliest time she could remember. She seemed a little upset with me for complaining that I felt like I had been dragged kicking and screaming into something I had never thought would happen to me, a least in this life.

Her confrontation with the facts as she saw them stunned me. Her harsh words caused me to reach deep down inside myself. Suddenly, a fire stirred within me, a fire that even God could not have ignited – except through my friend. She awakened in me a passion for ministry. From that day forward my call was clear and solid. For perhaps the first time I was able to go willing as I began accepting what seemed to be God's plan for my life, and accepting it without question.

It was as if my friend had taken that hot coal and pressed it to my lips herself. And I heard God say, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" And I said, "Send me Lord! Send me!"

The truth of the matter is we are all called to the one ministry of Jesus Christ. We are all called to make sacrifices in our lives for the sake of the Gospel message. How are you being called? Consider your call. Consider how God is calling you today to be in ministry to the world tomorrow – to serve, not to be served.

God's call knows no age limits – young or old. God's call is non-denominational. God's call is always an equal opportunity. God's call is not limited by our physical or financial limitations.

I have also discovered that God's call changes over time. So often we fail to understand that call can change. We tend to resist change, believing that it's not really God pulling us, leading us in a

different direction. This is why it's important that we continuously consider our call. This is why it's so important be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit in and through our lives, even if it seems to be moving us in a direction we really don't want to go. Most often, when call changes we are moved further outside our comfort zones.

At our All-Church meeting last Tuesday night, the district superintendent spoke about those people in our conference who are taking the step of starting new faith communities and in some cases planting new churches. Mike Horsley spoke of the great risk these spiritual pioneers are taking. Some are going places where there is little or no funding for a new church start. Some are going places where there is little or no funding for own salaries and benefits. Truly God has called these folks and they have responded with "Send me Lord."

I encourage you to open your hearts and minds to God's presence in your lives. How might God be calling you these days? If you are listening, are you arguing with God, saying, "Send someone else." Or are you responding, "Send me Lord." Like Isaiah, feel the holy presence of God coming into your life. Like Isaiah, let those seraphs press that hot coal to your lips and allow God prepare you for ministry. And when God says, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" Your answer will be, "Here I am, Lord. Send me."