**“A Called Life”**

Rev. Clinton G. Roberts Isaiah 6:1-8 First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest February 6, 2022

In the year 740 BC, King Uzziah died after a long and successful rule over Judah, during which time he had defeated its enemies, improved its economy and the strengthened the walls of Jerusalem. It should have been a blessed time, but Uzziah’s successes had rendered him prideful. Placing himself above the laws governing Israel’s worship, he forced his way into the Holy of Holies in the innermost chamber of the Temple and desecrated it by his presence. The High Priest Azariah and many others tried to stop Uzziah from doing this, but he scornfully pushed them aside to stand before the Presence where the cherubim keep perpetual watch over the Mercy Seat atop the Ark of the Covenant.

According to the Book of Chronicles, what happened next was an act of God. Uzziah’s forehead became leprous… and the laws governing leprosy were enforced. Uzziah was confined and quarantined by his son Jotham. He died shortly therafter, and was buried in a grave apart from his family. *“Pride goes before destruction,”* it is written in the Book of Proverbs (Pr. 16:18), *“and a haughty spirit before a fall.”* This describes foolish King Uzziah. But there’s another proverb in the OT that puts it a little differently: *“Before destruction one’s heart is haughty, but humility precedes honor”* (Pr. 18:12). We find that humility in the person of a young priest who may have actually witnessed the unlawful arrogation of the king. His name is Isaiah—and this is the story of his call.

I

There are many stories in scripture of being “called,” yet they all have one thing in common: God does the calling—and not us!

* God called to Adam in the Garden of Eden;
* And God called Noah to build the Ark.
* God called Abram to bring his people into Canaan;
* And God called Moses to set his people free.
* God called David to become the King of Israel;
* And God called Elijah to speak God’s truth to kings.
* God called Amos when he was just a poor farmer:
* And God called Ezekiel when he was held in captivity.
* God called Jonah, and he ran away;
* And God called Mary, and she said, *“Here I am.”*

God does the calling. And our part? Our part is to listen and believe.

II

The experience of Isaiah’s call is recorded in the 6th Chapter of the Book that carries his name, which, like the story of King Uzziah, takes place within the Temple. It was there that the Lord revealed himself to Isaiah in this way: he saw a vision of God sitting upon *“a throne high and lifted up,”*  a vision which illustrated God’s sovereignty and judgment. The real King, we see, isn’t Uzziah or even Jotham: it is Yahweh alone. And this is a vision of God prepared to pass judgment. This is serious stuff—both glorious and terrifying, as the seraphs sang, *“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts.”*

Isaiah’s reaction to the Presence of Yahweh is one of abject humility. *“Woe is me!”* he says. He admits his sinfulness with specific reference to the work of a prophet: his *“unclean lips”* in the midst of *“a people of unclean lips.”* What exactly is happening here?

Earlier in the Book, in Chapter 5, God says to the People, *“Ah! You call evil good, and good evil…Ah! You are wise in your own eyes…for you have rejected the instruction of the Lord of Hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel”* (Isa. 5:20-24). I wonder what God would say about how we characterize good and evil today? I suspect God would be no more pleased now than he was then. We have not evolved morally. And there are very few voices calling us to honor the word of the Lord.

III

Yet the Lord was calling Isaiah *“from humility to honor.”* A winged seraph cleansed his lips with a burning coal, saying, *“Your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.”* What a powerful way to express God’s forgiveness! Guilt is a crushing thing: it weighs us down, paralyzing us. It’s like dragging way, way too much luggage all the way through O’Hare airport! When you finally check in those 50 lb. suitcases at the counter, what a glorious feeling it is! You watch them depart on that conveyor belt, leaving you free to skip over to Starbucks for a hot drink!

That’s what God does with the burden of guilt. And our sins? God can blot them away, too. God called someone humble enough to know and acknowledge his unworthiness, and God forgave him, like Christ did for Peter on the lakeshore long ago. Isaiah’s mind and heart were opened, and his ears could hear the Lord. *“Whom shall I send, and who shall go for us?”* called Yahweh. Isaiah responded, *“Send me.”*

IV

“The Call,” as it is often referred to, can come in a thousand ways:

* Moses saw the Burning Bush;
* And Samuel heard his name.
* Elijah listened to *“a sound of sheer silence”* (1 Kings 19:12);
* And Paul was thrown to the ground.
* The three Galileans pulled up a bursting net of fish;
* And Augustine heard a child saying, *“Take and read…take and read.”* He opened his Bible and read this from the Paul’s Letter to the Romans: *“Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.”*
* Martin Luther got caught in a thunderstorm;
* And John Wesley’s heart was *“strangely warmed;”*
* And the man standing before you? He once stood very still atop a high New Mexican mesa, listening to the sound of swifts cutting the air like seraphs with their long, straight wings. He climbed down much later, and went on by another way.

Perhaps the most famous “call” of all was to our friends Jake and Ellwood, the Blues Brothers, when the preacher said, *“Have you seen the light?”* Now they were on “*a mission from God,”* which brings me to my final point: God never shows up just to “shoot the breeze.” God calls us for a purpose. And God calls us with a plan.

God called Isaiah to engage the faithlessness of his people, brought about by their economic and military success. Forty years later, he would still be preaching, with the Assyrian army at the gates. Isaiah was a man for all seasons, called to “afflict the comfortable” and to “comfort the afflicted.” Jesus called Peter to *“build my church;”* and Christ called Luther to reform and renew it. What did they all have in common? They were sinners. They were human. They were not the plaster saints we’ve turned them into. But in their own way, they all said, *“Here I am. Send me.”* Perhaps that’s what a “saint” really is: someone who is “sent.”

Conclusion

There are many “callings,” as we refer to them today: including medicine and ministry, teaching and the law. We “practice” these callings, referring to them as “professions.” But the Bible teaches that there are far more callings than these—as rich and as varied as the spiritual gifts which empower them. There is leadership and public service, just as people are called to become artists, dancers and musicians; there is knowledge and there is wisdom, just as people are called to become scientists, counselors and engineers; there is mercy and compassion, just as people are called to become doctors, nurses and caregivers; and there is hope and there is faith, just as people are called to come alongside those who struggle with addiction, guilt and despair. Marriage too is a calling. So is parenthood, and home-making, and all things humble that serve the needs of others.

In Isaiah 43, God says, *“I have called you by name, you are mine”* (Isa. 43:1).

That’s how personal our relationship to God really is. God is on a first-name basis with us! Are we ready to respond that way in return? When we do (and that can happen at any time), then we, like Isaiah, will also be able to hear what God is saying to us. And what we hear will be something so right, and so powerful, it will set into motion all the gifts and the joy within us, just waiting to be released. What we will hear is our “call:” a life filled with purpose; a life lived for others; a life that glorifies God.

Philosopher and writer Dallas Willard said, *“The most important thing in your life is not what you do; it’s who you become. That’s what you will take into eternity.”* A called life is precisely that: a life lived for others, where you become that uniquely gifted and beautiful person God intended for you to be all along. Therein lies your greatest joy—and your salvation, too.

For by grace and through love God is calling: calling you by your name.

Amen.