

## “Called to Serve”

“Then I heard the voice of the LORD saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’”

*What brought you to this place?*

This was one of the first questions that our class was asked during our first week at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. Our professor was interested in hearing the story of our callings, of how each of us was inspired to apply to study for ordination. As you might imagine, the stories were all quite different; but in the midst of this diversity there was one unifying element: no matter how we were called to this place, each of us were here for the same purpose. We were all called to serve as ministers of Word and Sacrament in the Lutheran Church.

*What brought you to this place?*

For those who God called to lead the people of Israel, the stories of their callings were as varied as their time and circumstance. For Abraham, it was the call to *“go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”* (Genesis 12:1). For Moses, it was the voice of God instructing him to *“come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”* (Exodus 3:10). For the prophet Jeremiah, God proclaims that *“before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”* (Jeremiah 1:4). Even for Jonah, the most reluctant of prophets, the call of God was clear and persistent: *“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.”* (Jonah 3:2). While their settings and circumstances were different, the calling of each was the same: to proclaim the Word of God and accomplish the Will of God for all God’s people.

In the prophetic book that bears his name, Isaiah shares the story of his calling, a report that has many features in common with other vocation reports in the Old Testament:

- A report of an encounter with God, either directly or through a messenger.
- A commission to do the Lord’s Will or speak the Lord’s Word
- A ritual act or sign symbolizing the designated role.

Isaiah sets his vocation story *“in the year that King Uzziah died”* (Isaiah 6:1), which was approximately 742-736 BC. The death of this king was a time of strife and uncertainty for the people of Israel:

- “The death of Uzziah marked a particularly vulnerable moment for Judah. He had been king for forty years and had led Judah to enjoy the greatest level of peace and prosperity since the Davidic empire divided after the death of Solomon... His death would have naturally given rise to fears and questions about policy shifts in even the calmest of times, but it occurred around the same time as the resurgence of the Assyrian Empire under Tiglath-pileser in 745 BCE. Fears about the future were at an all-time high when Isaiah saw ‘the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty’ (Isaiah 6:1).” – Gary W. Light.

In this time of great anxiety among God's people, Isaiah sees a vision of *"the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple."* (6:1). Because no one can see the Lord face to face (*"... you cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live."* – Exodus 33:20), Isaiah's description of the Lord's appearance goes no higher than the hem of God's robe, which is sufficient to fill the temple. The heavenly King appears with court attendants: *"Seraphs were in attendance above him; each with six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew."* (6:2). The word "seraph" comes from the Hebrew word for "burning," associated them with fire that symbolizes divine presence, holiness, and purification. In this *theophany* (appearance of God), they sing a song of praise that emphasizes the Lord's power and sacredness: *"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."* (6:3). "Holy" is used in the Bible for that which pertains only to God, emphasizing the radical otherness of the Lord (*"only thou art holy; there is none beside thee, perfect in power, in love and purity."* – ELW Hymn 413). The "whole earth" is filled with "glory," the powerful presence of the one who is radically other than the rest of God's creation.

- *"'Holy' does not denote primarily that something exhibits an ethical purity. It is a term that first of all marks something apart from the ordinary or common. It signifies that which is characteristic and special with regard to God. What is holy is separate."* – Light.

In the midst of other signs typical of a theophany (*"The pivots of the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke."* – 6:4), Isaiah cries out in woe, confessing his unworthiness: *"Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"* (6:5). In the presence of the holiness of the Lord, Isaiah knows that he is unclean, and his cry "I am lost" indicates that he fears for his life. *"It is a terrifying thing to be thrust into the presence of God."* (Light).

In direct response to Isaiah's confession of his unworthiness, one of the seraphs performs a ritual of purification that combines both word and action:

- *"Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said, 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.'" – 6:6-7.*

The seraph touches the prophet's mouth with a coal from the altar, pronouncing that his guilt is removed and his sin forgiven. This forgiveness was God's act, a divine action that makes Isaiah distinct from the rest of the unclean nation and *"free to step forward and respond when God calls."* (Christopher Seitz).

While God has been in Isaiah's presence from the beginning of this text, for the first time the Lord speaks – although not directly to the prophet. The prophet overhears the Lord asking the heavenly court about who should be sent: *"The I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?'"* (6:8). Unlike many of his fellow prophets, Isaiah steps forward without hesitation: *"Here am I; send me!"* The prophet who once considered himself unworthy to even stand in God's presence now steps forward to be the one who will be *"an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel."* (Acts 9:15). While Isaiah's vocation story is distinct from others whom God has called – including the Apostle Paul – the purpose of his being called is the same: to serve as God's messenger, proclaiming the word of the Lord to the people of God.

- *"Isaiah's encounter with the living God teaches us that there is no way to know God without being changed. That kind of transformation almost always leads to service, to work and witness in God's name. This requires that Christians practice a discipline of prayerful discernment, of listening for*

God's call in their lives. This is not just an individual endeavor but also the corporate practice of a worshipping community." – Kristin Emery Saldine.

*What brought you to this place?*

As we celebrate Confirmation with Meredith, Kloe, Alyssa, Dani, Blake, and Torri this morning, we may be remembering our own experiences with the day we were confirmed (many of you even have photographic evidence on the walls of this building). It is a time when we remember how we were brought to this place; it may have been a parent or a family member, a friend or neighbor, a pastor or teacher who accompanied us not only to the class meeting place but also through our journey of learning and discernment of what it means for us to walk as children of God. Each of the stories of this year's confirmands is as unique as those of our faith ancestors as well as our own stories; but whoever or whatever brought us to this place, each of us commit ourselves anew to *"serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth."* No matter what the circumstances of our call may have been, each of us has been called to serve.

- "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther's, who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world. But it is the same death every time – death in Jesus Christ, the death of the old man at his call ... The call to discipleship, the baptism in the name of Jesus Christ means both death and life. The call of Christ, his baptism, sets the Christian in the middle of the daily arena against sin and the devil. Every day he encounters new temptations, and every day he must suffer anew for Jesus Christ's sake." – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

No matter what brought us to this place, each of us has been called here for the same purpose: as God's holy people, each of us has been *called to serve*. Amen.