

### “Where Are We Going?”

“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’”

I don’t like surprises when I go on a road trip. I want to know exactly where I am going and how I am going to get there. In the past, this meant getting out my maps and planning my route. Since the advent of Google Maps, I plan my trip so that I know exactly what roads I will be taking, how long I will be traveling on each route, when and where I will turn, where I can stop for meals and gas, and where I will be staying for the night. I’m not against surprises in other areas of my life, but when I am on the road “the best surprise is no surprise.”

Of course, I can’t be that exact in planning other experiences or events that I may encounter. I’ve learned as a pastor that even if I begin the week with a firm schedule, one phone call can change the entire course of my week. I can plan every worship service to the smallest detail, but something might happen that morning that might necessitate a sudden change in direction. I can work on a sermon all week, but an event in the life of the church or the world might mean tossing out my original plan to address what is happening in the moment. I have learned that there are many times in life when I do not know exactly where I am going or where I am being led.

Throughout the Bible, God calls people into service, to be the people chosen to proclaim God’s Word or to fulfill God’s Will. In each of these situations, the person has an encounter with God, either directly or through a messenger; there is a commission to do the Lord’s Will or to speak the Lord’s Word; and there is a ritual act or sign symbolizing the designated role. People as diverse as Moses, Gideon, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel each experienced God’s call to be servants who will fulfill God’s Will for God’s people.

In today’s first lesson, Isaiah shares the account of his call to be God’s prophet. He sets it in “*the year that King Uzziah died*” (Isaiah 6:1), which was somewhere between 742-736 B.C., the end of an era of relative independence for Judah. His call story begins with the account of a *theophany* (appearance of the Lord) that he experiences: “*I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew.*” (6:1-2). The theophany is accompanied by a hymn of praise that is the inspiration for today’s opening hymn: “*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.*” (6:3); “*holy*” here emphasizes the radical otherness of the Lord, which will later be defined by Isaiah as meaning that “*my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*” (55:8-9).

Isaiah’s response to this spectacular appearance of the Lord is a cry of woe, confessing his uncleanness and unworthiness to stand in God’s presence: “*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 words of a Lenten hymn, the overwhelming sight of God’s power and might leads Isaiah to confess “*the wonders of [God’s] glorious love and my unworthiness.*” (ELW Hymn 338).

- “Was it the volume or the significance of the seraphs’ singing that caused the very threshold of the temple to shake? Was the smoke of that incense being burned on the altar or was it the dragon breath of the fiery seraphs that filled the temple? At any rate, Isaiah was aware of the presence of God in worship through every sense: He heard the song, he felt the shaking, and he could see, smell, and taste

the smoke. This worship of YHWH could be hazardous! The prophet cries out ‘Woe is me! I am lost’ (6:5). It is a terrifying thing to be thrust into the presence of God.” – Gary W. Light.

In direct response to the prophet’s confession, one of the seraphs performs a ritual of purification that combines word and action, pronouncing that Isaiah’s guilt has been removed and his sin has been forgiven. This is a pure act of grace; there is nothing Isaiah did or could have done about it himself. He is made distinct from the rest of his people so that *“he is free to step forward and respond when God calls”* (Christopher Seitz), which happens when the Lord speaks for the first time, although not directly to Isaiah: *“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”* (6:8). The question lacks specifics: where does God intend to send God’s servant? What is that servant to do when he or she arrives at the place to which they will be sent?

But Isaiah, without question or curiosity about the end result, without asking any specific details about the journey, responds without hesitation and with enthusiasm: *“Here am I; send me!”* Unlike many who have responded to God’s call with questions or hesitation (from Moses to Jeremiah and Jonah), Isaiah places his trust and confidence in God to lead him so that he might be the instrument for the fulfillment of God’s Will among God’s people.

- *“It seems that the call to follow the Lord is a call with no end in sight. In this case, Isaiah isn’t even told what to do exactly; he is just called to go. The simple fact that he is here, that he exists, is enough for him to serve as an integral part of God’s mission.”* – Lauren Dow Wegner.

While God reveals neither the destination nor the duration of Isaiah’s journey, the Lord does reveal some of what the prophet will proclaim as the Lord’s spokesperson, some of which may have led Isaiah to reconsider his acceptance of God’s call:

- *“Go and say to this people: ‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.’ Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed.”* – 6:9-10.

The message that Isaiah is given here to proclaim, *“is so jarring that it makes us want to install airbags as well as seatbelts for our worship of God”* (Light). Isaiah’s mission is clear: rather than call the people to repentance (as Joel proclaims when he calls the people of Israel to *“return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.”* – Joel 2:13), Isaiah is to actively prevent repentance and healing.

Isaiah’s response is to ask, *“How long, O Lord?”* (6:11), a phrase commonly used in psalms of lament (*“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?”* – Psalm 13:1). Since Isaiah’s petition is on behalf of others, it functions as a prayer of intercession similar to Amos’ plea on behalf of the people: *“O Lord God, forgive, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!”* (Amos 7:2). The Lord’s initial response offers no hope; Isaiah’s commission will not be fulfilled until the land is completely destroyed:

- *“Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; until the LORD sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land. Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled.”* – 6:11-13.

God’s answer to Isaiah is not to offer him a roadmap or a timeline, but to instruct him to be faithful to God’s call for as long as it takes, *“until the task is completed, until the job is thoroughly done.”* (Light).

While the call that Isaiah has accepted will be difficult, it is not without hope; the final words to the prophet are that *“the holy seed is its stump”* (6:13). While short on details, these final words hold out hope that as God blessed Isaiah with grace, forgiveness, and purification, the same might one day be possible for *“a people of unclean lips.”*

- *“Isaiah is called by YHWH to be instrumental in bringing the encounter between God and God’s people to the point of reckoning ... Judah could not be brought into a right relationship with God through a cheap grace and easy forgiveness. Sin is not meaningless. To have the possibility of living in right relationship with YHWH, Judah had to experience the full judgment of YHWH. Then, and only then, could there be real hope.”* – Light.

As Isaiah is given few details as to the destination or duration of the journey to which he has been called by God, the fishermen who witness Jesus’ miracle on the lake of Gennesaret (the Sea of Galilee) are also not given a roadmap or agenda when Jesus proclaims to them that *“from now on you will be catching people”* (Luke 5:10). After teaching the crowds who had gathered along the lakeshore from the boat that belonged to Simon, Jesus turns to him and instructs him to *“put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”* (5:4). At first, this seems like a pointless task to Simon, since they have fished all night and caught nothing; but in spite of what may seem to be pointless, Simon agrees to follow Jesus’ instructions and put the nets back into the water – even though *“to cast nets again – this time in deep water, which most likely means a bit more work and time – does not seem promising.”* (Wegner).

But this time, there is a difference: *“they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break”* (5:6), which leads Simon Peter to fall on his knees and cry out to Jesus *“go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!”* (6:8). Like Isaiah, being in the presence of this display of God’s power and might leads him to reflect on his own sinfulness and unworthiness to stand in God’s presence; *“here Simon Peter gets a glimpse of the power and knowledge of Christ and falls before him in the profound grip of his own sinfulness.”* (Fred Craddock). But instead of calling out Simon Peter’s unbelief or focusing on his lack of trust, Jesus responds with both a word of reassurance and a call to discipleship: *“Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people”* (5:10). Along with his partners James and John, the sons of Zebedee, *“the fishermen are caught by Jesus and given a new vocation”* (Alan Culpepper), one to which they will respond *“when they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.”* (5:11).

While the call to be “catching people” (“fish for people,” Matthew 4:19) may appear benign, it carried with it some of the same ominous elements that came with the call of Isaiah. In the Old Testament, “fishing” is often used metaphorically for gathering people for judgment:

- *“The Lord God has sworn by his holiness: the time is sure coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks.”* – Amos 4:2.
- *“You have made people like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler. They enemy brings all of them up with a hook; he drags them out with his net, he gathers them in his seine; so he rejoices and exults.”* – Habakkuk 1:14-15.
- *“I am now sending for many fishermen, says the LORD, and they shall catch them; and afterwards I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain and every hill, and out of the clefts of the rocks.”* – Jeremiah 16:16.

In the Gospels, however, the call to become “fishers of men” becomes a call to gather men and women for the Kingdom of God; it commissions the disciples as representatives of their teacher and as agents of God’s Kingdom and looks forward to the church’s evangelistic mission to *“make disciples of all nations”* (Matthew 28:19).

- “Jesus commissions the fishermen for kingdom service: ‘catching people’ ... the metaphor of fishing suggests various facets of the disciples’ role in relation to Jesus and the kingdom. Henceforth they will live by Jesus’ teachings and call others to him just as they themselves have been called.” – Culpepper.

Many of those who answered the Lord’s call never reached any final destination, nor did they see the results of their efforts. Many of these faithful disciples *“died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted it”* (Hebrews 11:13). God continues to call people into discipleship, a call that we received when in Holy Baptism we were *“reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ”* (ELW Holy Baptism). When we affirm the covenant God made with us in Holy Baptism, we promise to *“proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.”* (ELW Affirmation of Baptism). The church into which we are baptized continues to be called to be the disciple community that *“shall proclaim the Gospel by word and deed and thereby invite all persons to repent and believe.”* (Zion Constitution and Bylaws). We are *“a chosen race, a royal priesthood, and holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”* (1 Peter 2:9).

Our Lord continues to call us to follow him, to be his faithful disciples who will continue to share the good news and gather people into Christ’s kingdom. Like our ancestors who have gone before us in faith, none of us are given a roadmap or a timeline as to where we will be sent or when we will reach our destination. But we still respond – like the prophets and disciples who answered our Lord’s call without hesitation – because we live in trust and hope that God will be with us wherever we are sent and will bless our efforts even if we don’t see their fruition. The road may be unclear and the tasks unknown, but we know that God will accomplish all of God’s Will – on earth as it is in heaven.

- “This much, therefore, we may conclude with *confidence*: the Church that is enabled to endure the suffering of those who follow Jesus Christ into earth’s uncertain future will itself have a future. Willing to lose its life for his sake who lost his life for the world’s sake, it will find its life. And however insignificant and inglorious that life may appear in comparison with all that our imperial Christian past has conditioned us to expect, it will be ... *exceptional!*” – Douglas John Hall.

Our Lord won’t necessarily tell us where we are going when we are called into discipleship, but we do know that wherever we may be called, however uncertain or difficult the past may be, we have the confidence that *“the LORD of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our stronghold”* (Psalm 46:7), that the God who has been our “help in ages past” will be “our hope for years to come” as he leads us one day to “our eternal home.”  
Amen.