



Westminster Presbyterian Church
 Knoxville, TN
 May 26, 2024
 The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
 Sermon: "Calling In"

Isaiah 6:1-8 (NRSV)

In the year that King Uzziah died, 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.

And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: "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!" 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."

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!"

"Calling In"

Do you feel called by God these days?

The prophets report, when they heard their call, they saw the glory of God. Have you ever seen the glory of God?

*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
 the whole earth is full of God's glory, sing Isaiah's Seraphs.*

Likewise, Ezekiel, when he was first called by God to be a prophet, he saw something like a spinning chariot up in the sky. *Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy*

day, he says, such was the appearance of the splendor...of the glory of God (Ezekiel 1:28).

Moses doesn't see God's glory until late in his prophetic career. It's not until Exodus chapter 33, where he beseeches God, "Show me your glory, I pray." And even then, Moses is given just a glimpse of God's back among the rocks.

And then there's Isaiah's famous vision of the heavenly throne room. Whereas Moses gets God's back and Ezekiel God's chariot, Isaiah gets the full picture, seeing *God sitting on a throne, high and lofty...[and] the hem of [God's] robe filled the temple.*

The glory of God is put special display for the prophets.

A couple things to notice, as we think about glory, and callings:

First and foremost is who gets to serve in the office of the prophet. We may think of the prophets as revered, holy people, those most worthy to be called to a special purpose in God's plan for creation. And yet throughout, Hebrew Scripture goes out of its way to ensure its readers know the prophets aren't anything special.

Amos is introduced as a lowly shepherd;
Moses an outcast and a murderer;
Ezekiel is an exile, a captive of Babylon.

Even Isaiah, immediately upon seeing the glory of God, mentions his inadequacy:

Woe is me, he says, 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.

Isaiah is inadequate to the vision he has been granted. In fact, if you look closely, unlike the other prophets, you see, he can't even hear the voice of God until he's been cleansed by a coal from the fire.

Woe is me, he says when he sees the glory of God.

And that's another theme you see repeated in the prophets:

Not only are they lowly people.
They know they are lowly people.

Jeremiah, for example.

In the first chapter of Jeremiah, when God calls him, saying, “I have appointed you a prophet to the nations,” Jeremiah responds with a cry of desperation, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy” (1:6).

Likewise, Moses, at the very start of his mission, when he is called by God through the burning bush, he makes every excuse he can come up with to avoid going back to Egypt. “O my Lord,” he says at one point, “I have never been eloquent...I am slow of speech and slow of tongue (Exodus 4:10).”

If the prophets of Hebrew Scripture share any one characteristic, it is that they all believe they aren’t cut out for the job.

Do you feel called by God these days?

The prophets report, when they heard their call, they saw the glory of God. Have you ever seen the glory of God?

Many of us would respond, ‘Well, I’m no Isaiah.’

But that’s thing: God’s glory is not reserved for the ‘worthy.’ Isaiah wasn’t “Isaiah,” the prophet, when he was called by God. He was a guy in the temple. A *man of unclean lips, [living] among a people of unclean lips*. Over and over, Scripture illustrates, our calling doesn’t mean we are more worthy or more holy than others.

It begs the question: what if calling is not something we earn?

Calling was not something that Isaiah, or any of the prophets of Hebrew Scripture earned. There’s nothing in the text to suggest that.

When I went to seminary, they were always talking about call. “Tell us about your call to ministry?” they would say. It was even an essay question on the application. And even after we got in, we took seminars on call; we talked about it in small groups.

For the longest time, I thought that call was something that I had to earn. I thought that if I worked hard enough, wrote the best papers, gave the best sermons, I would show, I was worthy of a call to ministry. There were some good things that came from that. It pushed me.

But somewhere along the way, I confused achievement with calling. And I worried, all the time, that if I didn't measure up, then I must not be called.

And then, I started to wonder, if other people saw their work as a calling. Surely it isn't just ministers called by God to their work.

Do you think of your work as a calling?

What about all those whose work is not especially life-giving?

What about those – the vast majority of people on this earth – who don't get to choose their work?

And what about when you retire, is your calling finished?

Are you no longer called by God?

What about those who don't work in a traditional job?

And those who find their vocation at home?

God's call upon our lives is deeper, more encompassing, more universal than the jobs we do.

It's more meaningful than the things the worlds of work and capitalism tell us are meaningful.

Calling is not a list of achievements; it's surely not a number in a bank account; it's not even about who's impressed when you tell them what you do.

Last week, I attended a concert of several, absolutely stunning pieces of classical music. And at the beginning of each piece, one of the performers would introduce the next piece. Some of these introductions were clearly more rehearsed than others. Some read a prepared speech from a paper or tablet. Others were clearly making it up on the spot.

One of those introductions was to an early composition by the French composer Claude Debussy. The performer presenting the piece gave one of the less rehearsed introductions of the night. But he provided some interesting background. He mentioned in amazement that Debussy had composed the piece while just a teenager, working during a summer vacation at the Chateau de Chenonceau. The performer was clearly speaking off the cuff. So, I'm not going to fault him personally here. But I did take notice at something he said, because he said it twice. He said Debussy was a lucky enough teenager that he didn't have to sling fries at a fast-food joint for the summer. Instead, he composed this great work of art.

Now, before I go into this, let me pause, and note, I've said way more thoughtless and hurtful things than this. So, let he who is without sin throw the first stone.

But I've been chewing on that unnecessary dig at fast-food workers over the past week.

Maybe it's because unlike Debussy, I did actually sling fries, not just for a summer but for three years at a Burger King as a teenager. I'll be the first to tell you, I'm no child prodigy, mind you – you all know this. You've heard me sing.

Those long days and nights working those shifts were some of the most exhausting hours I've ever worked. We need to be careful, about what we say, about whose work gets to count as meaningful and important, and whose doesn't.

I am the first to admit I am a child of privilege. Because of my race, my gender, my sexuality, my class, a couple years at Burger King are just a memory. But I met there plenty of people who worked there a lot longer. A lot longer.

And I don't know if that's what they wanted or if it was just circumstance that led them there, but I can tell you, I met co-workers there who made who place a decent place to work.

I met people there who did their work with dignity.

They went the extra mile to be kind to the customers who came in (even when those customers weren't kind and treated us as less-than); they were patient with the clumsy, clueless teenagers like me working beside them; they made that place, that could have been so awful (I can still remember the smell of my clothes at the end of the night) – they made it a place that wasn't awful. Some nights it was even pretty fun.

- There were almost 5 million people employed in fast food service work last year.
- Their average age is not in their teens. It's actually in their late 20s.
- Most make about \$14 an hour – barely a living wage today.
- Most don't make it a career. They go on to other things.

Those of us who have never worked in that industry, should think a lot harder about what it means to do meaningful work, and live meaningful lives, before we use their jobs as the butt of joke.

I've been thinking about that comment, at that concert, this week. And it's made me think, also, of you.

I know there are many people here today who feel called to the work that you do. You find your jobs full of meaning. It is a way for you to serve and to love others. It is one of the avenues through which you live out your call. And thanks be to God for that, and for the Spirit that compelled you to say 'yes' to that call.

There are others in this community, who aren't sure that their job is their calling. Maybe you're still searching. Maybe you've found your calling in a place other than a job.

Your job and your calling can overlap, certainly, but I don't think we should think of them as identical. In this world, there are countless messages, some of them subtle, some of them overt, saying that we are only as good as our output, our jobs, titles, and accomplishments. They sometimes say we have to sacrifice everything to our jobs, including mental and physical and family health. Sometimes that message is, if you don't make these sacrifices, then we must not be cut out for that call.

There are countless messages that say your job is something that should exhausting instead of life-giving, sacrificial instead of rejuvenating, elite instead of accessible.

These are the messages of capitalism. That isn't how calling works, not callings from God. Scripture tells us call is more encompassing, more generative, more life-long and life-giving than that.

What if, instead of call being a destination you have to earn: a certain job, a certain role, a certain boss to please, or a certain image of success we think we should live up to...

What if every single moment was a moment of call?
Wherever we are. Whomever we are with.

What if your call is not so much about what kind of work you do, but rather it's about how you do it, how you treat people as you do it, and how you live your life?

- It's a call, to be good to the people around you.
 - To treat all people with dignity and respect and worth.
- It's a call to be kind and gentle to those who need support.
- It's a call to be stern and troublesome to those systems that need to be shaken out of their complacency.
- It's a call to be prayerful, always looking to God, asking, 'What does the Lord require of me?' Not some day but today, right now, right here.

Remember what the Seraphs said, when they appeared before Isaiah in his moment of call: *Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of God's glory. The whole earth.*

The glory of God surrounds you at every moment.
The whole earth is full of God's glory.

And like the prophets of old, that glory is a call to us, now, just as it was to Isaiah.

In every single moment, it calls you to live the life of faith.
In thanksgiving to God. Amen.