

Jeff Foels  
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5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
First United Oak Park  
Isaiah 6:1-13



## Hearing the Call

[Rainer Maria] Rilke in one of his letters said Christ is a pointing, a finger pointing at something, and we are like dogs who keep barking and lunging at the hand.

-*Franz Wright*, "The New Jerusalem"

This is one of those texts that is like a finger pointing toward truth. It is easy to bark at the hand, to take this text on its merits, to evaluate it, to explore its surface, to lunge at meaning. It is easy to take this text on a cursory level, without ever turning to see where that finger might be pointing, without ever encountering a message contained within.

It is easy to reject this text straight out of hand, because we find it hard to see ourselves in it.

*Whom shall I send?*

We've never heard the voice of God, never been so clear in our call as Isaiah. Now, we all know of people who have received calls like this, who have heard God's voice, seen a vision, who operate from the certitude of belief in an otherwise uncertain world. Yet we have not received such certainty. We have not experienced coming into the presence of God, have not experienced the voice of God calling for a volunteer. We begin to wonder if something is wrong with us. If God has not called us.

We wonder if we are passersby, extras in a showing of "Life, the Movie," starring "The people that God has called."

I don't know of a seminary classmate who hasn't struggled with a sense of call as it's suggested here in Isaiah. I don't know of a person who is free from such struggles.

This text in Isaiah has, whether we like it or not, set a norm for our understanding of how God calls people. Now, there are two types of call stories in the Hebrew Bible – the first is an encounter with God’s word. Think Moses and the Burning Bush. An Israelite or one of their ancestors is walking around someplace and God starts talking to them, calls them to become a prophet, usually over their protests. Or, in the New Testament, Jesus, God’s Word Incarnate, is walking around some place and starts talking to someone, calls them to be a disciple, and they follow.

A second kind of call is seen here in Isaiah. Isaiah experiences a theophany. Theophany comes from a same verb as epiphany. In an epiphany, literally, a light shines about something. You gain new insight into a topic. With a theophany, a light shines on God, you gain new insight into God. You see God. Interestingly, the Christian holiday we call epiphany is called Theophany by the Eastern Church. It’s where we get the name ‘Tiffany,’ too. A trivia note to share at your next party.

Anyway, Isaiah experiences the whole shebang, a theophany. Isaiah sees God, enthroned in the temple, with attendants, and the very hem of God’s robe fills the temple.

This is part of our challenge in seeing ourselves in the text. I have not seen God, have not heard God’s voice. On the very surface level, I have a hard time imagining this text without delving into some exciting, but somewhat off-topic questions. What does God look like? What did God look like to Isaiah? Is there any chance that this is a woman seated on a throne? You get the idea.

We get carried away into details without facing up to the central fact that God has just called someone, a human, to work in the world for God.

*Here I am, Lord.*

Now, this text is also difficult because it awakens something unpleasant within us, a melancholy. This is the deep part of us that desires, longs for a sure place in the world. We envy Isaiah in this text. We envy that God has given him a place in the world. God has given him a task, a purpose. Isaiah can go forward knowing that he belongs in the world. Isaiah learns in this text that his job is to be Isaiah, for God.

We always take Here I Am, Lord, to be a statement of presence. God asks, Whom shall I send? And Isaiah speaks up, raises his hand, says ‘Present’ ‘Here I am.’ But maybe there’s also this sense of Isaiah recognizing his belonging in the world. Isaiah is saying I am here, in the most existentially significant way available.

Regardless, we’ve encountered another challenge in seeing ourselves in the text. We see Isaiah receiving a call straight from God. We hear God’s voice in this text, “Whom shall I send?” We don’t have much experience with the voice of God. Something like Charlton Heston, maybe. Or, if you’ve seen the movie Dogma, Alan Rickman takes a humorous turn as the angel that is the voice of God. But we get to hear God’s voice here, in this text. To us, God’s voice sounds like.... “Whom shall I send?”

Simple enough, and yet, when we say that God’s voice sounds like “Whom shall I send?”, we start listening for “God’s voice to say Whom shall I send?” Isaiah has set the expectations for us.

If we are to belong in the world, if we are to understand our relation to God, if we are to live fully into our individual calls, Isaiah sets up the equation for us. Being called = seeing God (or maybe

hearing God's voice), + having God ask us to do something. It's straightforward, it's Biblical, it's a great model.

Except, if we don't hear God, we feel like an extra, left out, left aside. That's one way to respond to the text. Get jealous, or envious, wish for ourselves what Isaiah receives.

But if we do that, we're getting it wrong in another way. If we read this text and expect our calls to sound like "Whom shall I send?", and for the call to occur in the temple, with the seraphim and the hem of the robe and the coals and the tongs. If we read this text and expect God to appear before each one of us in glory...well, chances are we're going miss it when God appears before each of us. If we listen for the "whom shall I send?," but we are waiting for it to come from the throne room, then we miss it.

We miss it in the affirmation of a coworker – "You're really good at this, you know," we miss it in the compliment of a friend "You should think about doing this more often." We miss hearing our call from the voice of our children, in the voice of neighbors, in the voice of friends and mentors and loved ones. We miss it in the quiet stirrings deep in our chest as we read the paper, as we hear the news. We miss the "Whom shall I send?" that's present in our almost-unconscious reflections on our days as we drift into sleep.

Of course, we also bark at the text in another way. Even if we are able to see through the text to the truth, to see the truth the text is pointing at, we bark and lunge at that, and don't listen for what it is that we are called to.

And a lot of that is wishful thinking. Listen to what Isaiah has been called to do. He has been called to say to shut the eyes and stop the ears and make the mind dull. And not to some foreign nation. To his people. To God's people, the people of Israel.

And Isaiah's less jazzed about the whole endeavor now. Gone is the enthusiastic Here I am, instead we get the plaintive, "How long?"

*How long?*

Until the land is devastated and nothing remains. Until the desolation is so great as to overwhelm. Until the only thing that's left is a stump. A stump.

Some call. Some vocation. Some sense of belonging, of place in the world. We have longed to be able to say "Here I am," but we will rethink that if "Here" is not a place we would like to be. We don't want to say "Here I am" if we would rather be anywhere but here.

And it seems like that sometimes. It seems like this is a world beyond belonging to. Who would want to live in a world? This world?

I found myself looking around for that stump this week. Opening the newspaper, finding school shootings in Chicago. Our institutions in peril. Thousands homeless . Continuing earthquakes in Haiti. Billions hungry. Disaster and calamity and plague and violence.

This isn't a call to life in God. This is a call to despair. This is not the comforting call we'd hoped for, but a chilling call that overwhelms.

And yet. Here too, in the text, God points at something farther away. We bark and lunge at the bad news. We reject it, we say no, this cannot be, the world is not one of despair, but hope. God, how can you call Isaiah to deliver a message of disaster, why aren't you calling him to a message of hope. And God's finger points further. In the midst of this despair. In the midst of the vast emptiness of the land, in a world where only a stump remains, we snap and bark at the despair, as God points to the truth. The holy seed is the stump.

God calls us, God promises us, God needs us as a holy seed.

The cover story of this week's Presbyterian Outlook is "Haiti's Horror, Haiti's Hope". Here, in Haiti, where cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people.

The cover story of this week's Presbyterian Outlook is "Haiti's Horror, Haiti's Hope." The cover image is a seedling. A beautiful, verdant, green tree seedling, in sharp focus against the warm brown Earth. Indeed, the holy seed is the stump.

*And the hem of God's Robe filled the temple.*

We are able to hear the quiet "Whom Shall I send?" instead of the booming one. We are able to see the holy seed in the stump. We are able see hope in despair.

Yet still, we bark and lunge at the hand that points instead of seeking after the truth beyond. For as this texts introduces us to call, it does so against a backdrop of wonder.

The very words are wondrous. In the year King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of God's robe filled the temple. Seraphs flew about with six wings each.

We see the wonder in the text, and marvel at Isaiah's very presence in such a place. Isaiah is immediately ashamed, feels he does not belong among such wonders, feels himself to be unclean in comparison.

And we feel the same. We feel so small, so insignificant. We think of Haiti, thousands of miles away, and question that we are to be of use.

In a temple with seraphs, with a robe that fills the temple, what use could God have of Isaiah?

In a world of wonders, what use could God have of us?

In a world of microscopes and airplanes and vaccines, of filtered water and toothbrushes, of suspension bridges and satellites, what use could God have of us?

We see wonders on a scale of seraphim every day. We do not understand electricity, the postal service, the wonders of music, of voice and organ and strings. These are the hem of God's robe. Impressionism and jazz and theater and penguins and the rainforest. The moon and the mosquito, the wheel, written languages. Languages in general! These wonders are the hem of God's robe, and they fill creation. And we feel so small.

Synapses and gall bladders and symbiotic organisms and petrified wood. The hem of God's robe fills the temple of creation.

And yet, *as* Isaiah speaks of the hem of God's robe filling the temple, *Isaiah is there too*. Isaiah is in the temple, and if the temple is filled with the hem of God's robe, Isaiah is a part of that robe. The wondrous hem of God's robe fills the temple of creation, and we are one of God's wonders. You are one of God's wonders. God calls you, wondrous, individual you, to see beyond despair to hope, God has called wonderful you, a human, a person, an individual wonder of God. God has called you to be the holy seed. God has called you to work in God's world.

Thanks and praise to God,

Amen.