

### **Called by the Holy**

Have you ever wondered about what it takes to become a prophet of God? Isaiah's story is instructive.

It seems like the vetting would be extreme for such an important job. A candidate for Prophet should be morally, ethically, and spiritually above reproach. He or she should be bold and articulate and ready hear God's command. "Your mission, should you decide to accept it, is to speak God's word to God's people, who in all likelihood won't want to hear it!"

It was an important job, and the Bible validates many of those who received it with a story, not of their qualifications, but of their call. Not one had a degree and their resumés varied from shepherd to vinekeeper to priest. Their personal lives tended to be a mess, their mental stability was often questionable, and they frequently lacked courage. Yet despite God's all-knowing background checks, God still chose these fallible human beings to be his voice, his agents in the world.

So we see that the prophets of the Bible didn't prepare for the position and had no obvious qualifications. But they were called, then gifted, equipped, and sent to do God's work.

If you've been with us at any time since September, you've heard this same summary about the disciples of Jesus. Fishermen, tax collectors, and zealots, those of high social status and those with no social status, educated and illiterate, women and men and children, those with different abilities, people of varied skin color and culture and language—we're talking about all of us, aren't we? One of the most beautiful pictures of the body of Christ is the diversity of human bodies which comprise it! For in the language of "call," we all are called to relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Our vocation is not our job, it's in the relationship: we are Christ's disciples. Loved and called, that's who we are. John Calvin called it our "general calling;" Martin Luther called it our "spiritual calling." All of us are called to manifest the love and grace of God in every aspect of our lives. Our minds, our hearts, our hands—the gospel redeems everything about us, and our calling is to show that in everything we say and do.

But most of us also wonder about a specific calling. What does God want me to do with my life, in this time and place?

The example of Isaiah seems far removed. And maybe you're saying, "Whew! That's a relief. I'll never experience something so bizarre as a vision of God sitting on a throne, so I'll never called to be a prophet!" Maybe you're happy about that.

It's true, Isaiah's vision was otherworldly. God, wearing a robe so magnificent that it flowed from heaven to earth, filling the Temple. Seraphs—serpents with 6 wings each—flying around singing "Holy, holy, holy!" Smoke wafting through the air.

And like Moses before a bush burning but not burning up, who took off his sandals because he knew he was standing on holy ground, Isaiah knew without a doubt that he was in the presence of the holy. The sacred. The divine. God, Godself.

Woe is me, he said.

Woe is me. Isaiah lived in a particular time and place. He tells us that this vision took place the year King Uzziah died, which was probably 742 B.C.E. That's specific. There were geopolitical storm clouds on the horizon, specifically the threat of invasion by the Assyrians. But most of the people of Judah were blithely ignoring that threat, confident in the promise that this was their land given by God, and they could live on it as they wished. They could worship other gods if they felt like it. They could ignore the needs of the poor, and let the rich grow richer. They could party all day long, as long as the priests made their sacrifices in the Temple for them.

It was a way of life which was full of falsehood, a lie to the covenant. Which became abundantly clear to Isaiah that day in the Temple when he experienced a close encounter with the living Lord. So he confessed, "I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips." And when the seraph flew to him with a live coal and seared those lips, saying "now your guilt has departed," Isaiah's vocation as a mouthpiece for God was clear. No more lies. Speaking God's truth was Isaiah's calling.

The details of the vision are extreme. The calling to make a mark on the world was extraordinary—look at how many pages of this Bible have Isaiah's name on them, and think of how many Bibles have reproduced those words since they were first written on a scroll. It may seem that Isaiah's experience has nothing to do with our own. But my friends, we are still called to speak God's truth. We are still summoned to watch the signs of the times and name the falsehoods of our day. We are still called to remind one another that God wants our whole selves, not lip service, and our whole lives, not a token nod on Sunday mornings or high holidays.

And there are times we are called to speak up, at risk of offending, at risk of becoming unpopular, to speak up for justice and righteousness and truth. These are hard days to do that. We are living in times when our very language is polarized, when certain words or phrases are labeled "dog whistles" or "politically correct," or "code," as if those words belong to one camp or another. We are losing the ability to dialogue and seek truth together. The prophet's role is to speak and show God's truth, to move the world closer to God's way. "No prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown," Jesus said shortly before he was driven to a cliff on the edge of, you guessed it, his hometown. In today's context, it can be hard to separate the true prophets from the attention-seekers. Anyone who wants an audience can find one on the internet. The more outrageous, it seems, the more followers they can accrue.

So how do we know who is truly speaking for God? And how do we know when we have a specific call from God to speak?

The process of determining God's presence and call is known as *discernment*. Elizabeth Liebert, professor of spiritual life at San Francisco Theological Seminary, says, "As Christians, we discriminate, judge, or separate the voice of God from other voices so that we can continually follow God's call. We may search for God in the midst of our daily lives as we read Scripture, sort out the various voices of our culture, seek out our vocations, and so on." (<https://collegevilleinstitute.org/bearings/the-soul-of-discernment/>)

In other words, we don't have to have a life-changing religious experience, a vision, or a burning bush, to receive God's call. Most of the time, God's voice calls to us in much more mundane ways. We read scripture in the community of others who help us understand what it is saying to us today. We pray, alone and in the company of other pilgrims, seeking God's guidance. We listen and observe and reflect on what is going on in our world, and place our observations next to the wisdom of those who have gone before and the needs of those who will come after us. Authors Kathleen Cahalan and

Douglas Schuurman write, “Many Christians think God has a calling for them and their job is to get the information from God and follow through on it. [But calling] requires relationship, conversation, and discernment. . . . It takes time, intentionality, and creativity that includes getting lost, asking for help, and forging ahead on the journey.” (<https://collegevilleinstitute.org/bearings/five-questions/>)

And in the midst of all that ordinariness, it’s still possible to experience the holy, the sacred, the divine, God, Godself. It is still possible to sense God’s presence and gain a deep knowledge that, as Paul wrote, “we are the aroma of Christ to God, . . . not peddlers of God’s word like so many, but persons of sincerity.” (2 Cor 2:15, 17) It is still possible to stand before God and say, “Here am I. Send me.”

That ordinariness can hold the extraordinary is exactly what we see in Jesus Christ, a human being who was also God. It is expressed in our sacraments, when the stuff of everyday living becomes the sign of God’s presence among us. Last week after an infant boy was baptized in our sanctuary, I had a few moments to talk about it with his older brothers. We were looking at the water in the font, and I told the boys that we got the water from the sink, that it was ordinary water. “I was wondering about that,” said one of the boys, “because when you baptized Brooks it looked like different, like it was special water.” I think he was seeing the mystery of the extraordinary in the ordinary. I think he was seeing the truth.

In a few minutes, we will eat bread and drink grape juice and name those the body and blood of Christ, the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation. Earth and heaven meet; the worldly and the divine are joined; the everyday and the eternal are one in the sacrament, as they are in Christ, and as Christ invites them to be in us. Every bush is burning to those with eyes to see God’s presence around us. Notice. Heed. And respond.

Here am I, Lord. Send me. May this be our sincere prayer.