

Whom Shall I Send?

Isaiah 6:1-8

I'm sentimental, built that way. I tear up at small but tender things. That comes from my mother, I guess, but in recent years I've noticed it in my dad too. My mother would cry over something that touched her, sometimes on TV, sometimes in a conversation. She almost never cried because she was genuinely sad, or angry or afraid. She was a strong woman, even as she was an unabashed sentimentalist.

I saw her rare crying due to sadness. I saw her cry when my brother's life was threatened, and when her father died of a heart attack. And I remember her crying when my dad was about to go into the navy during the Second World War. There was tension in that scene, a pre-scholar (which is what I was in those days) picks up on the stress of the moment automatically. No one knew at that point where my dad would be sent, or whether he would get back (turns out he never left stateside - but we didn't know that then).

Uncle Sam called, and after learning that his employer had repeatedly requested deferral a number of times before, my dad called this practice off. He wanted to answer the call of his country. My mother cried, and my father held her, and I sat in my child's rocking chair and stared at the two of them that evening.

A call from the country, an answer made with conviction amidst genuine fear.

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You see there are many kinds of calls, aren't there. Not all of them come from God; not all of them deserve response. But it's always an important moment or moments; it gets our attention.

I was chatting with a man in the congregation the other day who wanted to talk about what he was beginning to sense in terms of doing something important for God.

"It's not a call, exactly, he said." [I think it is.]

We have a fixed notion of what a call contains, that it's about preachers, and missionaries, and chaplains and people like that, not really about us. But I have known lawyers who have felt called to do what they do; I have known fireman who

felt the same way. All of these people place a high value on discerning what God wants of them and then responding. So did Isaiah.

Some who study the prophet have concluded that the passage that Anne read for us this morning is not really about a call actually but the prelude to a message that Isaiah was trying, completely unsuccessfully, to give to the king. The message was harsh, it was a message from God that the king and even the people would not like to hear. But Isaiah had to deliver it; that's what he was called to do. It was a message about the end of their nation (his, the king's, the people of Judah) and on one ever wants to hear a message like that.

Most likely Isaiah already was attached to the temple, when his "call" came, as one of the officials who had a right to be there. And in the midst of serving as he thought he was supposed to, in the middle of an otherwise predictable worship service he gets a vision and a message that changes his professional understanding completely. That same thing happened to John Wesley, our founder. He already was ordained, as a priest in the Church of England, when he received a new and life-changing call from God. He was established, working, doing what he was trained to do, and then, with no warning, things changed and he felt a "call" from God. That ever happen to you?

Have you ever been going about your business, maybe even here on a Sunday morning, and suddenly become aware that things are not the same anymore and never will be? That there's a claim on your talent and your understanding of life that will turn you in a new direction, and that it will not let you go even if you ignore it?

That's happened sometimes all very innocently, not dramatically like Isaiah's call, but convincingly nevertheless. I talked recently with someone who reported becoming convinced that tithing was just the right thing to do, and ever since, he's been doing it; his wife became impressed by the same idea a little later. Was she convinced because of his commitment to this witness? Maybe so, maybe not. Was God calling either or both of them to this understanding? Maybe so, maybe not. I think yes.

Calls come in all sorts of situations, not always, I think, not even most of the time, as a call to professional ministry.

But all calls, every last one of them, are life-changing. They make life and how we live it, deeper, more meaningful, and sometimes even against what we would actually like to be doing, or how we want to live.

Some calls are vague, some are specific. Some calls change more than once over your lifetime. Some calls are for a short period, others are lifelong.

“Jesus wants me for a sunbeam” - that’s a call that even a child can receive.

Isaiah, perhaps near the end of his life, perhaps even because he had been put on trial for treason and was now defending the idea that God had truly called him to deliver a most uncomfortable series of messages to Judah and the king.....Isaiah, relives the circumstances of how all this began; he’s reciting for the court the events that led to his ministry as an unpopular prophet. He is unwavering in his assertion that his call is legitimate. And he answered the call with fervor, not like so many others before him or since. He knew what he had to do, that God’s claim on him was complete and unavoidable. And he was eager to do it, no matter how it worked itself out. That’s his defense.

Remember that the call doesn’t always assert itself at the outset quite so strongly. Remember too that a call from God can be a growing realization that life, your life in particular, needs to take on new meaning. Remember that God may be calling you to a dedicated ministry doing what you do already, except with a radically new grasp of the purpose for your doing it.

The Call of Isaiah. The Call of Betty, or Dr. Stewart, or the woman who takes care of your children while you are at work, or the dry cleaner who makes your life better just by the way he engages you when you come to pick up your jacket, or the checker who knows that his primary concern is the person buying the groceries, not the speed of his work, or the bottom line of his supermarket chain.

Calls. Is God calling you? Yes, I believe so. I see the reality of “call” in everyone’s life.

Find out what it is, pursue the answer. Let God change your life because of it. The result will amaze you. Amen.