

# **“Isaiah’s Call and Ours” by Ken Burton**



## **The fifth Sunday after the Epiphany**

**February 6, 2022**

One of the responsibilities of the Celebration Circle Mission Group, of which I am a member, is to be sure that Seekers has a preacher every Sunday. Our usual approach to this is to ask you, the Seekers community, for volunteers, and you have recently received an email from Deborah about preaching during March, which coincides with Lent this year. I encourage your prayerful attention to that invitation. There are times, however, when we get within two or three weeks of a particular Sunday without a preacher for that Sunday. When this happens, it is the responsibility of one of us in the

mission group to preach. This must be done, whether not we have a particular interest in preaching that Sunday. It is a "duty", if you will, of Celebration Circle membership. In the multiple years that I have been a member of CC, I have never stepped forward to do this, always leaving that particular duty to someone else in the group, but when the problem arose several weeks ago concerning this Sunday, I somehow felt it my duty to respond, so I did, and here we are.

So I want you to know that the sermon you hearing now was created under these rather unusual circumstances. It's about call, one of our favorite Seekers topics, and specifically the call of Isaiah in the passage from Isaiah 5 which Anita just read. You might also like to know that I was originally going to talk about both Isaiah's call and that of Peter, James and John as narrated in the Gospel lection from Luke 6. That turned out to be a bit much for one sermon, so I am focusing on Isaiah. Another reason for that focus is that I have heard the story of Simon Peter's call to be a "fisher among humankind" in contrast to his original work as a fisher among fish, since I was a child in Sunday School. I think that long history, including family associations about being pointed towards "full-time Christian service", actually another name for human fishing, made it harder for me to come to the Gospel in a fresh way. I should emphasize that I am not suggesting that this passage is not deserving of our careful attention, but only that I am not going to do that today. As for the Isaiah passage, I don't recall encountering it before the Seekers School of Christian Growth, so for me, it still has a certain freshness about it, not to mention its inherent excitement, which I will get to in a moment.

But before I do that, I must say something about the Epistle, the passage from First Corinthians that Nancy read. It summarizes what has traditionally been a central tenant of

Christian faith. Known doctrinally as the substitutionary atonement, this is the idea that “Christ died for our sins”. Consistent with most progressive Christians, and with all due respect to the Apostle Paul and the long list of theologians that have followed him, I cannot accept this statement as being the heart of what our faith is all about. This morning I simply want to note my extreme discomfort with these words and save further work with it for another time and perhaps another preacher better equipped than I to address it. That said, I must add that our theme for the season, “Unveiling Love,” offers an important clue to an alternative understanding of the beating heart of our faith.

So I now to the passage from Isaiah 6:1-13, that is, the account of Isaiah’s call. Bruce Epperly, in his blog “The Adventurous Lectionary” begins his discussion of this passage as follows:

*Get ready for a wild ride! Strap on your seat belts and put on your helmet! We’re entering the amazing realm of the Twilight Zone, Narnia, the Lord of the Rings, and Hogwarts, an enchanted world, wild and wonderful, where mysticism and miracle, signs and wonders, where God shows up and turns our world upside down. Where God shows us the divine glory, asks the impossible, and then empowers us to be more than can imagine!*

Before we start on our wild ride, hear a word from Charles Aaron, writing in *Working Preacher* about the context for it.

*The first five chapters of Isaiah lay out the spiritual problem of the Judeans. They have forgotten and forsaken the Lord (1:4); their worship is futile (1:11-17); corruption marks their leadership (1:23). Greed has led to injustice (5:8).*

This is the year 740 BCE. Epperly reminds us that

*[t]he great king Uzziah has just died, and uncertainty is in the air. Uzziah's leadership brought safety and stability to the land. His steady hand gave the people confidence in the future. But, what now? Will the next ruler be wise and strong, or unsteady and prevaricating?*

It is then in this period of social and political instability that Isaiah experiences his call vision, and what a vision it is! First Isaiah sees a figure representing the Holy One sitting on a throne in the Temple. Around the throne are seraphs, huge creatures with six wings that flew around the throne of God proclaiming God as "Holy! Holy! Holy!" and announcing that "All the earth is filled with God's Glory!" The sound of this caused the Temple to shake and to fill with smoke.

The wild ride is all too much for Isaiah, who feels very much out of place in this place of Divine Omnipotence, not to mention the noise and smoke! His first reaction is "who me?" He says "I have unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips (v.5)." Isaiah clearly feels that he is not worthy to have this vision of the Holy One, much less to be a messenger of God to God's people. He is trapped by his feelings of guilt and unworthiness. In this condition, he cannot respond to God's call on his life.

Does this "who me?" reaction feel familiar? More than once I have responded with something like, "You've got to be kidding!" An example for me is those times in Celebration Circle when the need for one of us to preach in a couple of weeks has been clear. Although no one has explicitly asked me to do this, the possibility of my doing it has come to mind, and the response in my inner conversation has been "You've got to be kidding!" And this is not the only time at Seekers or elsewhere in my life that this has happened. I have more than once used a sense of my own inadequacy as a reason (more likely, an excuse!) to not respond positively to a new call.

But getting back to our story, or more accurately Isaiah's vision, God responds by causing Isaiah's lips to be touched by a burning ember with the announcement that "your corruption is removed, and your sin is pardoned (v.7)". This is a painful symbol, intended to convey the power and intensity of God's love as God reaches out to heal his wounded servant, and then to empower Isaiah to use his healed mouth to speak God's word. If you're wondering how I am going to relate this piece to my own experience, I'm going to disappoint you. No burning coals against my lips, or any other part of me for that matter. All I can report is an increased awareness of the lameness of my excuses for not responding, along with a growing sense of being able to do so. And, yes, that's how I got around to offering this sermon.

Isaiah is now ready to hear the call of the Holy One. God asks "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" Isaiah's response is the now classic "Here I am! Send me!" (v.8). Holbert notes that "these lines have...become a cliché for us. 'Whom Shall I Send' is a hymn that has become among the most popular in our time. We should always be leery of something that becomes so popular; popular phrases have a way of losing their initial significance and become instead co-opted by the culture that popularizes them". As most of us at Seekers know, responding to God's call is rarely that easy. Marjory Bankson, in her book *The Call to the Soul*, has documented the difficulty in going from "Who me?" to "Send me!" Marjory calls this process crossing the "poison river." She writes that

*[t]he Poison River is a dividing line between inspiration and application, separating affect from effect, keeping the feelings of love and body-connection in the private sphere away from the public sphere of institutions. Commitment is required to cross over into another way of being in the world. At the edge of the Poison River it is possible to believe something wholeheartedly...and still not do it.*

I make this reference somewhat parenthetically with respect to Isaiah's story because moving from understanding to action does not seem to trouble him. He has a different issue. As part of his call, Isaiah learns that his new life and ministry is to have a peculiarly unsatisfying quality. Isaiah is told that, at least in the short term, his message is going to be rejected by the people. In other words, God is calling Isaiah to a ministry that, at least in human terms, will fail. Charles Aaron writes that

God specifically tells Isaiah that his preaching and ministry will not "work," in the sense of positive response. The people will not listen. Isaiah's words will even create the dullness. ... The passage offers hope in the form of a God strong enough for the evil in the world. Nevertheless, Isaiah's ministry and preaching will not necessarily motivate the people to listen or to buy into the vision.

Isaiah is expected to deliver his message to people who he knows in advance are not going to listen to it and that will, for the most part, be driven into exile. So why bother to offer the ministry, to proclaim the message, if exilic disaster is going to happen anyway? Or, as Isaiah puts it, "How long, O God?" We can only imagine Isaiah's consternation. He probably wishes he had never uttered those faithful words, "Send me!"

A distant, small hope is offered in the concluding verse of the passage:

*But one-tenth will remain,*

*and will repent.*

*Like...an oak*

*that burns to the ground in a fire,*

*then is cut down, leaving only its stump—*

*in that stump is the holy seed.*

Holbert suggests that "Isaiah's only hope, and our hope too, is that from the smoldering stump of a blasted tree may come the "holy seed" of the future with God. There are times for comfort, but Isaiah's time was not one of those. Rather [the Holy One] has called him [and is calling us] to" respond fully to that call, to cross the Poison River, to be the faithful, loving people that each of us was born to be.

May it be so. Amen.