

Whom Shall I Send?

Isaiah 6: 1 - 8

Play video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnOPu0_YWhw

What you just viewed was part of a project arranged by The Washington Post— “an experiment in context, perception, and priorities—as well as an unblinking assessment of public taste. In a banal setting, at an inconvenient time, would beauty transcend?”

For 45 minutes, in the D.C. Metro on January 12, 2007, Joshua Bell played Mozart and Schubert as over 1,000 people streamed by, as you saw, most hardly even taking notice. If they had paid attention, they might have recognized the young man for the world-renowned violinist he is. They also might have noted that the violin he played was a rare Stradivarius worth over \$3 million.

Just three days earlier, Joshua Bell sold out Boston Symphony Hall, with ordinary seats going for \$100. In the subway, Bell garnered about \$32 from the 27 people who stopped long enough to give a donation.¹

When I first watched that video – like many of you, I’m sure – I immediately noticed the woman with the white bag who at the end stopped to listen. “Finally”, I thought. “Here’s someone tuned in.” It turned out that she actually had recognized Bell, she was already familiar with his music. She had seen him before.

Watching this made me think of that statement by Jesus from the Gospel of John – “*My sheep hear my voice and follow me.*” Like, there was that one sheep who recognized the voice of beauty. But for those of us who are followers of Jesus, the great Shepherd, we understand that sometimes the noise and distractions of life gets very loud, even overwhelming, so that hearing that familiar Voice is not always easy to do.

¹ *Gene Weingarten, "Pearls Before Breakfast," The Washington Post (4-10-07);*

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Even if we want to, somewhere deep inside. We can easily be just like those crowds there in the Metro.

I'd like to read for you today the account from Isaiah 6 of one of the most memorable encounters that anyone ever had with God. Isaiah is in the Temple, and he has a vision. He simply begins like this: "In the year King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord." He describes as best he can what that was like:

...[the Lord was] seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. ²Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. ³And they were calling to one another:

*"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory."*

⁴At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

Isaiah's response to this sight is exactly what we would expect, exactly what *our* response would likely have been had we been in that place – and perhaps this is the reason why so many of us rush around with our 'fingers in our ears' in the unconscious hope that a moment like this would never arrive:

⁵ *"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty."*

Gene Peterson, in "The Message" captures the angst in this cry with his rendition:

*"Doom! It's Doomsday!
I'm as good as dead!
Every word I've ever spoken is tainted—
blasphemous even!
And the people I live with talk the same way,
using words that corrupt and desecrate.
And here I've looked God in the face!
The King! God-of-the-Angel-Armies!"*

It is a fearsome thing to come into the presence of Almighty God. And consistently in the

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Scriptures, the reaction not only to seeing God but even to people who have a close proximity to God, is *fear*.

Moses comes down from the Mountain, having been with God for 40 days, and the people made him cover his face with a veil because they couldn't bear to look at him. The angel Gabriel, straight from God's presence, appears to the shepherds out in the field to share the Good News of Emmanuel, and those shepherds 'were terribly frightened'. Same thing for Joseph, and Zechariah, and John, and on and on.

Proximity to the God of Holiness tends to bring about the immediate feeling that 'I am going to die'; the reason being, that our sin is exposed... the white hot purity of God's Light simply reveals the truth about ourselves, and all the pretenses that we work so hard at keeping up, all the facades, the delusions – they're all revealed, we suddenly realize that maybe we're pretty good compared with other people, but in *God's* presence we are flawed and broken. That is never a pleasurable experience. Of course not.

But like Isaiah, if we don't run away, we find there is always more to the encounter than fear. God is fearsome because of God's Holiness, but the reason God approaches us at all – or allows us to approach him – is because God's nature is Love. And each encounter with God brings with it an unexpected offer: where we expect death and destruction, we receive Grace. Where we expect judgment and condemnation, God says, "I will help you. I will make you able to stand in my presence." I will forgive, I will Atone.

Something that never occurred to me before this week is that Isaiah's cry of 'shame' in the presence of the holy God specifically had to do with his words. I've always – because I guess I never thought about it deeply enough – looked at this passage as a description of Isaiah's 'commissioning'. And actually, that's how it's described in most commentaries. It works out very neatly: God reveals himself to Isaiah, Isaiah confesses his sin, God atones for it, and then Isaiah is sent off into ministry. God asks 'who will go for me?' 'Who will I send?' And Isaiah says, "Here am I! Send me!" And off he goes!

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It's all very neat!

But what I often forget is that this isn't Isaiah chapter *1*, it is Isaiah chapter *6*! Commentaries entitle this chapter "the Commissioning of Isaiah" but Isaiah, in fact has *already* been preaching the message of God to the people of Israel before this! He's already doing it. In the *midst* of his work, he has a vision of just who it is that he is representing to the people. And *then* he cries out, "I'm undone! I am a man of unclean lips!"

So, he refers to his lips – meaning his *words*, his *thoughts* – what I hear him saying is, 'Here I am, speaking for the Lord, but I'm a sinner!' He is revealed: "I have mixed motives", "I have wrong thoughts", "I'm messed up. I can't do this! How can I possibly speak for *this* God?"

And God responds to him by sending one of the great Seraphs to him with a burning coal 'from off the Altar'; and with that coal he touches Isaiah's lips...(coming from the Altar, this is highly symbolic of the coming sacrifice of Christ), and he says, "your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

Then he asks that famous question... "*Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?*"
To which Isaiah answers: Here am *I*... send me.

If this book is chronological, this isn't Isaiah's commissioning. It is more like his *re-commissioning*. Isn't it? If we could put it into New Testament terms, we might say that this isn't Isaiah's *conversion* but this is a moment when Isaiah's faith, his commitment, his understanding – all that and more – is *deepened*. The scope of his task has just become much clearer to him. He understands now as he didn't before, just who it is that he is representing. He has learned more about himself as well as about God.

He must certainly realize now that he operates *all the time* out of the Grace of this King of kings. His life, his ministry, is all about grace. This – this work I'm attempting – is

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God's work! And so, in spite of his frailties; in spite of his weaknesses and limitations – and his sins – he could go on. Because God was going to provide everything he needed.

I have found in my own life, (and in my experience this is often true for others as well) that the hardest part about doing ministry – any kind of ministry – is not *starting* it. You know, sometimes we have to garner up some courage and motivation to ‘take the plunge’ and that struggle is real, and important, and I’m not downplaying it. But we eventually find that the harder thing about ministry is *continuing* in it. To keep going when you’ve passed that point where the idealism is fading and the reality is setting in.

The reality about our own limitations. The reality of our weaknesses; the vastness (and often the impossibility) of the task set before us. The fact the work is never finished. It is difficult to persevere in ministry. There is hardly a ministry endeavor that does not eventually bring us to our knees – if we take it seriously at all. All our ideas of how ‘ready’ we are, how prepared we are, tend to melt away with experience... and we eventually come face to face with reality: “*I’m a flawed human being. I can’t do this myself.*”

I mess up. I make mistakes. I make bad choices. It’s inevitable. But it happens.

And that can be a moment when we come to that proverbial ‘fork in the road’. Having put our hand to the plow, as Jesus put it, we have to decide: “Do I turn back or do I press on?” Maybe that’s exactly where Isaiah was?

I think that in many ways, the more *significant* commitments to ministry, and more *significant* decisions to be followers of Christ, come not at the beginning of the journey, but somewhere down the road, after we’ve come to realize in a clearer manner just what it is that we’re up against. What we’ve really committed *to*. Because only then do we understand what we have available to us in Christ.

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 12

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But [God] said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Isaiah came face to face with God... and, thankfully, he didn't run away. But he discovered in a way deeper than he ever knew, God's Grace, which was enough for every need.

I was reading this passage last Wednesday when I received a phone call from a former member of our church, Nawechi Temu Lindner. You might remember that she and Kevin got married and (sadly for us) moved out to Minnesota.

Nawechi is a social worker, and is an especially gifted young woman – very articulate, caring, and competent, godly woman. Yet in the year and a half since they've been in St. Paul, she has not been able to find a job in her field. So, she told me (and gave me permission to share this btw) that just last week she decided to 'Do the Samuel thing.' Which meant, she was going to simply wait on God, and when he called she was going to say, “Speak Lord, your servant is listening.” What do you want me to do?

Three days later, she received a call from the pastor of the church they have been attending (a UM church in Au Claire, WS) offering her a part time job of director of youth ministries at that church. So she was calling me because all she could think of were reasons why she *couldn't* do this. And she wanted my 'advice'.

I said, “Nawechi, you won't believe the Scripture passage that I have open in front of me.” I told her it was Isaiah 6, and she immediately recognized it. But just to be sure, I said, “You know, it ends with God asking “Who can I send, who will go for me?” To which Isaiah responds, “Here am I, send me.” Now, there's no pressure there or anything...

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But as I just had been reading, I pointed out how God met Isaiah's need... God supplied everything he needed. And *then* Isaiah was sent out *again*. I said to her, "You know, God has blessed you with many gifts; you may have a high learning curve as far as programming and things like that – and we have two excellent resources right here, and there's lots of stuff that can help you there. But as far as *you*, I can't think of anyone better equipped to lead young people in discipleship.

God has *already* given you what you will need. And he will give you the rest as well. Isaiah discovered, in this *recomissioning*, that he could *go* – sent by God, into his ministry, without worrying about whether or not he was 'good enough' or 'ready'; without fretting over his sins, and failure, because God would supply everything he needed.

He will do no less for me... and for you.