

Isaiah 6:1-8

¹ In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ² Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³ And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." ⁴ The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

⁵ And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" ⁶ Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷ The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed, and your sin is blotted out." ⁸ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

Before we delve deeper into the scripture, I want to express my deep gratitude for the opportunity to stand before you today. It is a tremendous and humbling honor to be asked to preach. I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to Rev. Abrams for this invitation. Now to our story.

This is Isaiah's call story, a narrative that resonates with our current reality of political trauma and chaos. It is a call story not just for Isaiah, but for each of us and the church as a community. How do we respond to God's call in a world filled with rage-filled, toxic social media, divisive politics, and the demonization of "the other"? Our call is clear - to initiate the construction of a healing society.

Most pastors can tell you of their call. When they stood or knelt in the presence of the living God, they felt transformed by grace and said to God, "Here I am, Lord, Send Me." I have more than one call story. I have felt calls, not just a first call, but renewed calls, that have occurred at different times in my life. From the time I heard the call to "follow Me" to when a saint from Olean asked, "Would you think about being our pastor?" From the time my grandson was born to the time when I got a call asking would you consider being the moderator of the Presbytery? From the time I adopted my granddaughter's perfect word to describe ministry, messy, to the time I received the invitation to come to speak today.

They were experiences of being in the presence of the living God. The most powerful is when I was baptized as an adult; I was either 19 or 20. It took place at Gracewood Presbyterian Church in Memphis, Tennessee. I planned on responding to the three questions I would be asked with strength and boldness. The first question was something like do you consider yourself a sinner in need of Jesus Christ. I answered boldly yes so that the whole congregation could hear. Then something happened, and I was overwhelmed by the Spirit of God. Looking back, I can only say this: the experience was so overwhelming that I can't even recall the other two questions or what happened next. It was a powerful experience of the presence of the living God.

These were incredible moments in my ministry, which began over 55 years ago with a call from my wife to be suggested; why don't you check this Jesus out? And those times continue to this very moment. What is your story of a call or calls from God?

I know I am to be here on behalf of Presbytery, which is vital to me, but it is also vital to be with you and help us reflect on our calls from God.

God is calling us. One of our problems is that, like Isaiah, we think we are not up to the task, uttering in the old Saturday Night Live skit Wayne's World words, "We're not worthy, We're not worthy."

Did you notice it was not God but Isaiah who doubted Isaiah's adequacy? The idea of touching hot coals to Isaiah's lips is not because God needs to change Isaiah, but because Isaiah needs to recognize in God's eyes that **he is worthy, and so are we.**

That is a good message for all of us. We are worthy. We are worthy because we are God's people, each created in God's image. We are worthy for whatever task God is calling us to.

Saying I'm not worthy or I can't do this is what I call a "cop-out." It is not our worthiness or ability that is at stake. It is our trust in God. We need to believe that God will give us what we need to do what needs to be done. God will provide the task and the means to accomplish it.

Another thing to notice is that God is not calling us to change everything or everybody, but to speak the word and take action so people might hear and change, although whether they do or not is in God's hands, not ours.

I just returned from a preaching conference at the Festival of Homiletics in Pittsburgh. One speaker said to turn your story into a song.

When I was installed as moderator, I shared the words to my favorite song. "Dance with Everybody" by Drew Holcomb and the Neighbors.

Here is what speaks to my heart. This is my story, and this is my song. They sing:

 "Let's put aside our differences.

 Lace up our shoes

 Let's narrow the distance between me and you

 Meet me in the middle

 Let's quit keeping score

 I wanna dance with everybody who came through that door"

And the chorus of the song continues:

“Throw your hands in the air
Throw your hat in the ring
Throw your hips and your heart into everything”!

I know it doesn't say it all, but my ministry is about bringing people together where possible. When I enter my office, a quote from Romans 12:8 on my door reminds me: If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with all.

This is a bit optimistic and perhaps sounds naïve, but I don't see it that way. God calls us to speak words and to take action to end division in the church and society.

I will admit that I don't have the same call as Isaiah to condemn others for their lack of faithfulness and sin, although there is a place for that. I am thankful for that because Isaiah's message is to a people who won't listen when he cries: Change your hearts and minds and let your worship match your actions of justice.

Isaiah had the unwelcome task of reminding the powerful and privileged that they were responsible for caring for the most vulnerable in society and structuring their lives and their communities in ways that did this. As a reward, Isaiah was kicked out of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and sent scurrying home to Judah.

We need to listen to prophets today who make us uncomfortable as they call us to live a more just life and create a more just society.

I deeply respect those people who are called to such a life.

My call is more pastoral than prophetic. I am not a prophet, and I am never sure if that is due to faithfulness to what I see my call as or a bit of cowardice and unfaithfulness. I see my call as seeking to bring people together, and I don't think condemnation helps because it shuts down communication, for I must remember that I am worthy as a child of God and those who see things differently than me.

It is expressed by a banner outside our church, a poster on my office door, and one on my office wall that reads:

Love your neighbor.
Who doesn't
Look like you
Think like you
Love like you
Speak like you
Pray like you
Vote like you
Love your neighbor

No exceptions.

It sounds nice, but I am sure we can find some real difficulties with some of these.

I firmly believe that a changed heart is necessary to hear the hard words of where we have been less than faithful to Jesus' call to love our siblings, neighbors, and even enemies. For us to be able to hear about the wrongs done and how we have profited from them, we need an openness that comes from a changed heart. It is only by the power of God that I can admit I have profited from a nation founded with racism and genocide as part of my heritage. These problems won't go away by ignoring them. I didn't participate in creating them, but I can see how my life benefited from them in ways and suffered from them in other ways, such as not appreciating the total beauty of all God's people.

So, I come today in a spirit of repentance because of a changed heart that lets me hear the hard words I need to hear.

I must remember that our calls are neither identical nor should they be. The danger is that we look down on others who don't share our call and passion. We need to rejoice in our call and celebrate the calls of others. Just as scripture taught, there are a multitude of gifts, but they are the same spirit.

Having said all that, there are some things that must be opposed by all people of faith, such as Racism, Colonialism, prejudice, bigotry, and all the other isms, including gender identity, age, sexual orientation, class, ability, ethnicity, and the myriads of different ways we divide ourselves. And they must be denounced by us without equivocation. We need to see how our call fits into overcoming these things and building a neighborly, just society.

They will require steps of apology, humility, a change of heart by the perpetrators, and doing what can be done to make amends. It is like the formula I have developed for my life when seeking to apologize: I did it, it was wrong, I am sorry, I will try never to do it again, and what can I do to make it right?

I know that we, as siblings in Christ, are responsible for working at this. If we cannot do it among ourselves the church, how can we speak to the world about breaking down the walls that divide us and eliminating the barriers that separate us?

My term as moderator will end in two days, and I readily admit that being here preaching and delivering this apology from the Presbytery Council is the high point of my term. Thank you for your gracious welcome to me and my family. I pray that you will find ways to help us move forward together as the people of God.

Bless you and thank you for the opportunity to worship with you.