

“AN UNLIKELY VOLUNTEER”

Isaiah 6:1-8

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Most of us hate to wait. We're all too familiar with traffic tie-ups, long lines at the supermarket, that annoying music that plays while we are on "hold," waiting for a real person to answer the telephone. We're busy people and we don't like to wait! In her book, *When God Is Silent*, preacher and author, Barbara Brown Taylor, tells about an experience she had waiting in line at the post office. Have you ever waited in line at the post office? Some Christmases, I have grown old waiting to mail gifts to our out-of-town relatives and friends! This was Taylor's experience:

"It was lunch hour on a busy day," she writes. "When I came through the door, ten people stood in line with cardboard boxes, postage machines, and priority mail envelopes in their hands. All I needed were some stamps, but since a return trip later in the day would obviously cost me more time than waiting, I decided to wait.

"One problem I have always had with holding still," she continues, "Is that my mind kicks into overdrive. Freed from practical concerns such as walking upright or steering a car, my brain takes advantage of the hiatus by thinking of all the things I have not done that I ought to have done and all the things I should have done. Perhaps it has something to do with my religious training, or maybe it is simply a sign of neurosis.

"Whatever it is, I had a lot of time to do it that day. I have not given the dogs their heartworm pills this month, I thought. I have not checked out that gas smell in the kitchen, nor have I done anything about setting up a tax-sheltered annuity. I spend too much time at work. I do not spend enough time with my sisters. Before I know it, we will be three old women who have missed out on most of each other's lives. When will I get my priorities straight?

"Needing a break from this train of thought, I began to read the FBI posters on the wall. By the time I had examined four or five of them, my own sins seemed small. I had not killed anyone, after all; I had not kidnapped anyone or robbed anyone at gunpoint. In order for my mug shot to show up, the accusations would have to be more existential: **Grand Anxiety, First Degree Guilt!**

"'Next,' the clerk said, and the line moved forward."(1)

Where do your sins of omission and commission confront you? As you lie in bed at night? As you wait in line at the post office or the grocery store? Isaiah was in church when he began to reflect upon his life. He was in the Temple in Jerusalem when he saw a vision of God that caused his whole life to pass in review.

The Bible tells us that Isaiah entered the sanctuary. We don't know whether Isaiah was attending a worship service or simply went into the sanctuary by himself to meditate.

Sometimes it is the music of the choir and the organ and the voices of the congregation united in joyful songs of praise that inspire me. Other times I need the quiet and the solitude of our sanctuary or a walk through the park to restore my spirit. Some of us can point to places in this church where we believe God spoke to us in a special way. For others, there is a campfire or a candlewalk or a similar mountaintop experience that has been pivotal in our journey of faith.

That day in the Temple was such an experience for Isaiah. The Bible says that Isaiah “*saw the Lord.*” The voices he heard singing were so dramatic that it seemed as if the whole building shook. Smoke was everywhere. As if this were not enough, Isaiah heard a voice addressing him out of the whirlwind. He was frightened. His sins, his shortcomings, became obvious in his mind as he saw the display of God’s glory.

Then one of the heavenly beings took a live coal from the altar and placed it on his lips, not burning his lips, you understand, but cleansing them, making Isaiah not only able to hear the word of God, but to speak it. But was he willing to do so? “*Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?*” the voice of God asked. Then Isaiah replied, “*Here am I, send me!*”

Whether in line at the post office or sitting in church, at some time, in some place, all of us come to the realization that we are not the people God created us to be. I love Isaiah’s confession, “*I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.*” I have a foul mouth, Lord, but what do you expect? Everybody around me uses bad language, too!

When I was a boy, if I said certain words, my mother threatened to wash my mouth with soap. I made the mistake of not taking her seriously! One day she overheard me using one of those “naughty” words, and so she took out a bar of *fells naphtha* soap — the nastiest tasting stuff that was ever invented — and took me to the sink and washed out my mouth. I thought a long time before I used bad language again!

The act of cleansing is symbolic of what took place in the Temple that day with Isaiah. After the hot coals had touched his lips, the seraph, God’s heavenly messenger, said, “*Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed, and your sin is blotted out.*” (Is. 6:7)

My mother’s hope was that I learned a lesson from the soap incident. God forgave Isaiah, but God did not intend that Isaiah go back to his former behavior. Instead, God called Isaiah to a mission. “Who will go and proclaim the good new of forgiveness to the people I love?” asks the Lord Almighty, looking right at Isaiah. “Who will call my people to accountability for their actions?” Then, not just on an emotional high or in the euphoria of the moment, but in an act of commitment that defined the rest of his life, Isaiah replied, “*Here am I, send me!*”

In this sixth chapter of Isaiah we see a rhythm. It is the rhythm of worship; it is the rhythm of life. We become aware of our inadequacy, our shortcomings, our need for God. God forgives our sin. God calls us to a mission of love and service in the world, and we respond. Although we mean well, and make our commitments with good intentions, as we confront the realities of daily life, we fall short and fail to keep our promises. Then the cycle needs to start all over again. That’s why we have weekly worship. To be honest, sometimes I need to confess more than once a week! I have never understood people who do not feel the need for regular worship. “Are you going to church this Sunday?” “No, I went last Sunday.” But, don’t you need to go every Sunday? I do. That’s my confession.

Sometimes we read these stories about the prophets — Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel — and we think that they were somehow so much more focused and alert, and certainly much more holy

than we are. The truth is that these people were no different from the rest of us. In fact, Isaiah's comment indicates that he is just about the last person he would have expected God to call, and he certainly was **an unlikely volunteer**.

On this Sunday when we honor our graduates and celebrate their accomplishments, we both look backwards to their achievements and forward to their future. I want to say to them and to all of us in no uncertain terms that **God's call comes to each of us**, that God has a purpose for your life and a mission for you to accomplish. No one is on this earth by accident. All of us are here by the design and purpose of Almighty God. Just as God called Isaiah, so God calls each of us, all of us, to follow where he leads.

The mission to which God calls us is the same mission to which God called Isaiah: share the good news about God's love with those who have not heard his message, and call believers to accountability for their actions. From Genesis to Revelation the Bible tells us that God has high expectations for us. Are we living as God intends? It is our job to ask the hard questions, to establish the rhythm of worship and the rhythm of life so that all people have the opportunity to live the full, free life that God has given us.

Isaiah preached repentance and justice for forty years, but he was not always successful. Preaching to people of unclean lips was difficult and dangerous work! Not everybody wants to hear about forgiveness and repentance. Not everybody wants to clean up his act. Not everybody wants to have her mouth washed out with soap! That's why Annie Dillard in one of her books says that we should wear crash helmets in church, and that ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares in addition to giving us bulletins and taking up the offering!(2) That's why we have yellow construction tape around the pulpit and the lectern today. There's no physical emergency this morning. The Trustees didn't put this tape on the lectern and the pulpit because the equipment is faulty. The warning tape is to remind us that what the Bible is calling us to is dangerous stuff! This morning we are commissioning our graduates for service in the world. If they take that commission seriously, they may need crash helmets and life preservers. In ages past, following Jesus led people to risk their lives. Taking our commission seriously may lead to risky behavior and radical acts today!

On this Peace with Justice Sunday God is calling us to do the things that will lead to peace in our homes, in our communities, in our nation and in our world. We are not talking about peace at any cost. Peace with Justice implies not the kind of peace that simply means giving in or backing down. Rather it means working toward fair and just solutions to the problems that plague our world. As United Methodists, I repeat, we do not advocate peace at any cost. Rather we are asked to commit ourselves to work toward the day that Isaiah envisioned, "*When they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, when nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.*"(Is. 2:4) How will we accomplish this? By walking in the light of the Lord. (Is. 2:5) That was Isaiah's message. That is God's message today.

"*Whom shall I send, and who will go us,*" God asked Isaiah. God is posing that same question to each of us today. A seminary president once challenged the students by saying, "*Do one thing every day that scares you!*" We serve a God of high expectations. God calls us to take great risks. What is God calling you to do today that is so bold, so risky that it scares you just to think about it?

God is standing before each of our graduates and before all of us asking, "*Whom shall I*

send and who will go for us?" May each of us have the courage to say, "*Here am I, send me!*"

Prayer: Dear God, as we hear these words of Isaiah, written more than eight centuries before the birth of Christ, it is as if they were written for us. Help us to realize that you are calling us today. Help us to follow where you lead. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Notes:

1. Taylor, Barbara Brown. *When God Is Silent*. Crowley, 2000.
2. Quoted in *The Christian Century*. Vol. 126. No. 11, p. 18.