

“Do You Hear God Calling?”
Sermon by Lisa Crismore
February 10, 2019 – John Knox Presbyterian Church

Isaiah 6:1-8

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. 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. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. 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!”

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 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.” Then I hear the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

My husband and I recently watched the movie “First Man.” It is the story of Neil Armstrong’s journey through his personal and professional life that eventually landed him on the moon. To watch that footage of him first stepping out onto the moon’s surface was amazing. Now, I have to admit that this was something when I was 8 years old did not interest me as I was annoyed that it was the only thing being televised those 8 days. For which, I remember my mother scolding me and saying that this was the most important time in history during our lifetime. This was the very first time that a human walked on the moon!

Now, watching this as an adult, I think about what it was like for Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin to step out on an unknown surface and walk into a mysterious atmosphere. It had to have been like no other experience! I am sure even their mission training was nothing compared to this. Moreover, that moment changed their lives forever!

Today, in our scripture, Isaiah has an incredible experience that changes his life forever! He encounters God in the most mysterious way. Put your imagination hats on and imagine if this was happening in our sanctuary! God is seated up in our organ area. God’s robe is cascading down to where the hem has filled this entire space. I picture it being very silky and luxurious. It feels like we are resting on pillows.

And flying very gracefully over our heads are seraphs or angel like beings. Their wings have covered their eyes and feet. They speak saying, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory.” Then, if this wasn’t enough to let us know that we are in God’s presence, the room begins to shake and the space fills with smoke. Except the smoke doesn’t take our breath away or burn our eyes. It only makes it dim for us to see.

God is here in our presence. God is there with Isaiah. Have you ever had one of those times where you have felt the presence of God? It is so strong that you have no doubt that he is with you! In our confirmation classes, we have asked this question of our youth and mentors. We ask them to draw a picture and share that moment. Their answers have varied from walk in God’s creation and the beauty of the earth has given them that moment with God, or a time with a loved one, or when they have held a baby in their arms, or a special worship service, or in the midst of prayer. For me, it was in the quiet of a morning when I was about 13 or 14 years old and I was at a sleepover with next door neighbor. Everyone was asleep and the early morning sun was coming through the window in beams of light. It was clear to me that this was God.

I don’t remember feeling inadequate or unclean at that moment. Perhaps, it was because I was so young. But, there have been other times I have felt God’s presence and not felt worthy like Isaiah.

It is no wonder when Isaiah is standing there in the presence of God with his eyes on his creator that he feels unworthy. He knows he has messed up and is not perfect. We hear his words, "Woe is me. I am lost."

I find it interesting that it is his lips that he points out which gives him trouble. The words that he and others have spoken have caused him shame. How many times do we use our words to hurt others? How many times do we use our words to hurt ourselves? How many times do I use my words to hurt God?

In the midst of the lost, broken, frail, vulnerable moment when Isaiah confesses and lays it out for God. Then, what does God do? He sends a seraph down and places a red-hot coal from the altar on Isaiah's lips. Not to burn or punish but to purify and cleanse. He hears the words, "Your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Just as mysterious, as God appears with the flowing robe and smoke, which envelops the room; God saves us from our sin and lets us begin again; and again; and again; and again.

And, not only lets us begin again, but calls us to go out like Isaiah to be prophets to the world. Isaiah hears the call, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?" The renewed Isaiah responds boldly, "Here I am, send me!" I will be your messenger, Lord! I will go out and share your message to the people. What is it like to be a prophet of God? When we hear that call from God, how do we respond?

As I was processing this passage, I was thinking about a seminary student who had gone through the process to be an ordained minister of word and sacrament about 6 years ago. In our presbytery, the students meet annually with the Commission on Preparation for Ministry as they discern their calling. This is what Jillian Flynn is currently doing as well as Tom Markey did when he was attending CTS.

This particular student had gone through seminary. They had gone through all the requirements checking them off over the course of their 3 years of study. They had completed CPE, Clinical Pastoral Education which is time spent in a hospital learning about pastoral care. They had done their field education and preached for our committee. We had celebrated their passing of all the ordination exams just like we celebrated Jillian for passing her Bible Content Exam.

This is a bright person. They firmly believed that God had called them to be a minister and do God's work in the church. We on the committee also believed this and affirmed them by saying, "This person was ready to receive a call and to be ordained."

Soon after they graduated, this person got an internship with the General Assembly. They loved their job and had been promised that there would be a permanent position in the future. Unfortunately, the General Assembly was going through a tumultuous time. "The powers that be" were not able to follow through on their promise and this person was crushed. We can all relate to this person's heartache and disappointment.

The fascinating thing is that this person went on to be a gifted teacher in a school, which serves low-income families. Many of the students come from rough homes and they face many challenges. These children are being blessed by the work of this person.

I share this because the work of a prophet is a messy business. There is brokenness and unclean things that happen in the world. People get hurt and wounded even in the church. Yet, there is God. "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory." Thank goodness that God can take our mess and make it right. Thank goodness that God gives prophets the strength to persevere through it all.

I want to share one other call story with you. I go back to the beginning of the sermon. It was Buzz Aldrin, who took wine and bread with him to the moon. While he waited to get out of the lunar module to walk on the moon, he celebrated communion. Buzz was an elder at Webster Presbyterian Church in Houston and had received permission from the General Assembly to do this. NASA did not permit him to share this with the public because they were being sued from an earlier incident when an astronaut had read scripture from space. Buzz did share this message, which was radioed from the moon, "I would like to request a few moments of silence And to invite each person listening in, wherever and whomever they may be, to pause for a moment and contemplate the events of the past few hours, and to give thanks in his or her own way."
(<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2012/sep/13/buzz-aldrin-communion-moon>)

As he ate and drank the elements, he says, "I poured the wine into the chalice our church had given me. In the one-sixth gravity of the moon, the wine curled slowly and gracefully up the side of the cup. It was interesting to think that the very first liquid ever poured on the moon, and the first food eaten there, were communion elements."
(<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2012/sep/13/buzz-aldrin-communion-moon>)

We never know when God will call us. The time and reason some times are as mysterious as God. How will we respond when God calls us? Will we doubt our ability? Will our sin get in the way? Will we be humble and ready to be used like Isaiah? If you answer in the affirmative, there is no doubt that your life will change forever. Thanks be to God for all the faithful who answer the call by saying, "Here I am, send me!" Amen.