

“Here We Are; Send Us!”

Fifth Sermon in the Six-Week Series: Hold On! – *Hold On - to Our Commitments!*

Isaiah 6:1-8

New Revised Standard Version

*Sitting in Calvary's
office at desk:*

Picking up phone

*“Calvary Baptist Church of
Denver, Pastor Anne speaking,
How may I help you?”*

*“Oh, hi God. What's up? Uh-
huh. Yeah, I hear you. Wow,
I'm so sorry, that sounds awful.
What a crazy situation; I can't
even imagine...Make sure you
take care of yourself God as
you handle all this; take your
day off and stuff..”*

*“Oh wait what? Ah okay...so,
you're looking for help with
this situation? Well, I, um, Gee
God, I'm super busy. Hang on
a sec...Lori, I'm super busy
right?”*

*Looking over toward
Lori's open office door:*

Audio from Lori:

*“Yep, you're SUPER busy;
booked until...let me*

*see...hmmm...yeah, you are
booked until forever.”*

*“Yeah, I'm super busy God.
But – I can transfer you to
Pastor Morgan or Pastor Alice
and I'm sure they'll be able to
help. If not, you could always
try Church of the Risen Christ
or First Plymouth; they're both
right down the street. Want
their numbers? Oh, right, of
course you already know their
numbers. You're God. Well
then, I guess I'll talk to you
later God. Thanks for calling.
Yeah, yeah, Call anytime!”*

Hang up phone

I don't know about you, but I
am the opposite of Isaiah.
When God calls, instead of
“Here I am, send me!” I'm
like, “Oh no, not me; ANYONE
else but me.” And this “nope,
not me” response comes in
many forms.

Like the student who avoids
eye contact after their teacher
asks a question, looking down
at their textbook praying,

“please don’t call on me, please don’t call on me” when God calls we say, “I don’t know the answer God, I’m not prepared, I don’t have the experience or skills...”

Or like the person walking down the hall who, when they see someone they don’t want to talk with, whips out their cellphone to pretend they’re on a really important call, intentionally dodging them, when God calls we say, *“I am too busy to answer you right now. I have more important things to be do...”*

Or like the person who watches a natural disaster unfolding on the news and sees a plea from the Red Cross for donations and doesn’t give a dime thinking that someone ELSE will surely respond – after all how many millions of people are watching this? – when God calls we often say, *“Oh, I assumed you were talking to other people, God, not me...”*

Or like the person who knows that racism is real and who feels bad about it but who does

nothing to actively address it personally or systemically, when God calls we say, *“that’s too complex, God; I don’t want to get involved, I’m afraid I’ll say or do the wrong thing. I know there’s a problem, but it’s not my problem...”*

I know ALL of these responses. I have been all of these people. I am all of these people. If you’re like me, and maybe you’re not, but if you’re like me, you look for “outs” and “excuses” to say, *“I’m not the right one for this, God – it’s not a good time; those aren’t my gifts; I don’t know enough; I’m too old, I’m too young; I’m too busy. It’s someone else’s turn, it’s not my problem, it doesn’t affect me, and on and so forth.”*

Isaiah, though, Isaiah baffles me. Who says, *“Here I am, Lord; send me!”* when the world is falling apart? Because make no mistake, this is a time of upheaval, unrest, and uncertainty for Isaiah. I don’t know what he had going on in his personal life, but in terms of civil unrest and struggle, it was like 2020 but back in 738 BCE.

The causes of the unrest and instability were different than our own, but the effect was the same. People were stressed out; they were dying; they were suffering; people were praying ‘*How long, O Lord?*’; they were impatient and disillusioned.

The first five chapters of Isaiah reveal that the Judeans have forgotten and forsaken the Lord thinking they could handle stuff on their own (1:4); their worship had become routine and meaningless (1:11-17); and their leaders were corrupt, accepting bribes from rich folks instead of meeting the needs of poor folks (1:23). This greed led to widespread injustice (5:8) and on top of this social and spiritual crisis, Isaiah 6:1 describes an acute political crisis: the long-serving king, Uzziah, who brought stability for five decades, had died.¹

As when any leader dies or leaves office, there are

questions about succession, and stability. This was no time to mess around with a messy leadership transition. The Judeans were facing increasing threats from the Assyrian Empire, who were the most formidable army of this time in terms of weapons, strategy, and resources, and in contrast, Jerusalem was a city with hastily built defenses filled with refugees from captured countryside cities.² Things could not be more precarious and the leaders were waffling about “what’s next” when people’s lives and livelihoods were at stake.

And this is the context in which our prophet and priest Isaiah encounters the very presence of God. And what an encounter it was! Isaiah SEES God sitting on a throne; he HEARS the calling or the song of the seraphs, “*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;*”; he SMELLS the smoke that is filling the Temple; he FEELS the

¹ Charles L. Aaron, Jr., “Commentary on Isaiah 6:1-8,” *Working Preacher* (27 May 2018), accessed on Nov. 13, 2020 at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-d-common-lectionary/the-holy-trinity-2/commentary-on-isaiah-61-8-6>.

² Roger Nam, “Commentary on Isaiah 6:1-8,” *Working Preacher* (13 Nov. 2016), accessed on Nov. 13, 2020 at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/isaiahs-call-and-sending/commentary-on-isaiah-61-8>.

threshold of the Temple shaking; and he TASTES the fiery, ashy coal as it touches his lips. This was not just a vision of God, it was a full body experience, involving all five senses.

At our Pastors' Pondering session on Tuesday night, one of you asked us why don't we have more tangible evidence or proof of God; because if we did, we'd be more likely to believe. It's a great question and one that perhaps makes even more sense when we see the kind of experience of God that Isaiah had and the eagerness that it evoked in response: "*Here I am, send me!*" Is the reason Isaiah jumps up to volunteer so readily because he is in awe of God's majestic, enveloping presence and is assured in a tangible way that God forgives his failings?

Yeah, probably. Perhaps it would be way easier to say "*Yes!*" to a God we could see and experience like this. But. We better be careful what we wish for. Because if we keep reading Isaiah 6, as soon as he

says, "*Send me!*" God sends Isaiah to go to the people with a message that will fail. God tells Isaiah that what he preaches will fall on deaf ears and no one will understand his words, let alone heed them, and when Isaiah wonders how long this will last God responds in verse 11, "*Until cities lie waste without habitant, and houses without people, and until the land is utterly desolate,*" (6:11). Once everything is destroyed and burned, even if a tenth of it remains, God says, that will be burned too (v13). The teeny tiny ounce of good news in Isaiah's call is that there might be (maybe) one stump that survives, and that will be the holy seed of a new beginning (v13). But even still, you're gonna have to dig around in the ash for a long time to find that holy seed. God is clear; the devastation isn't going away any time soon. In fact, it's gonna get worse before it gets better.

Sound familiar? With COVID cases skyrocketing – over 10 million in the U.S. and close to a quarter of a million deaths, all

we are hearing is that things are gonna get worse before they get better. Yes, there might be a seed of hope in a vaccine, but for now, things are dire. Everyone is at risk. Stay home, wear your mask, don't mix households, don't travel to see family. For how long? We do not know...hopefully NOT until all we see is devastation and desolation. But this virus is relentless and it does not discriminate.

As in Isaiah's time, it can feel like WE are in the middle of a lose/lose situation. *"Let me get this straight God, your people are already suffering, and they are going to continue to suffer, and things will get worse, but you still want me to go and proclaim good news to them even though it won't change a thing and the suffering will continue?!"*

Who wants to say "yes" to something that you know will fail? What's the point of spreading the good news if

nobody is gonna listen to you and nothing's gonna change?

Good question. And this is where this text can really teach us, I think, IF we let it. It's a humbling lesson. But also a hopeful one, IF we're willing to set aside our understanding of "successful outcomes" and trust that God knows what God is asking of us, even when it seems like a really big ask with no payoff. Sometimes it takes forever to see God at work in the world – especially with the big stuff like justice and peace. And this was true in Isaiah's time too. Because you see, while Isaiah chapter 7 tells us about the next king, King Ahaz, and how he fails to comprehend and trust God, but the following chapters will eventually reveal a good and faithful king who will pursue the justice, righteousness, and peace that God desires, King Hezekiah;³ and in the context of the whole biblical narrative, we know Hezekiah won't be the last. Jesus will come, but he'll be different. Jesus comes not as a

³ J. Clinton McCann, Jr., "Commentary on Isaiah 6:1-8," *Working Preacher* (18 Nov. 2012), accessed on Nov. 13, 2020 at

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/isaiah-2/commentary-on-isaiah-61-8-2>.

king that's obsessed with power, but as a king that's obsessed with the people, even when, *especially* when, they are suffering. Nothing of what Jesus did or said or accomplished while he was on earth rang of pomp and circumstance or pride or ego or winning. It was all about serving and loving the ones who others cast aside. Which often felt like losing. What the world called a failure, God called a savior.

Humility is key for the Son of God, but also for we who we are children of God who answer the call of God. This kind of humility admits that *"we do not always see or know what God is up to in the world, but we trust that God is up to something."* This kind of humility is audacious and courageous and says, *"I may not HAVE all the answers but I know I must BE part of THE ANSWER."*

One of the myths of answering "God's call" is that we will all have an Isaiah-esque experience of call and when we

do, THEN we'll know what we're supposed to do and how God wants to use our gifts. But keep in mind – this is chapter 6 in Isaiah. Isaiah was already going about God's work in the world, before God spoke to him directly. We can't wait until we feel God calling us "personally and directly" in the exact manner in which we imagine and wish God would call us. It's not always about some grand vision or special one-on-one experience with God. In fact that's the exception, not the rule. Just looking around at the world and realizing that not all people are treated as God's beloved children should be enough for us to realize that God is sounding the alarm and calling each and every one of us to do something.

The stress of the election and the grief from the pandemic and the outrage and suffering from racial injustice and the mounting pressures and anxieties that we each deal with in our own lives – these things are not going away. But that's even more reason why the people of God cannot go away.

We must rise up in the midst of all that we see and experience and say, *“Here we are; send us!”* Not because we are the saviors that are going to come and fix all that is wrong in the world, but because we know the power and strength and love and healing of the Savior who has already come to show us how to live and love – which, if we just followed his example, would actually save the world.

God is calling us. You. Me. Now. In 2020. In the year that we all want to be over and done with – God is calling us. And for us to say to God, *“It’s not the right time or I don’t have the right gifts or I don’t know how or I don’t know if it’ll make any difference”* – well that’s just not acceptable for the people of God. The prophets are proof that we have always made these types of excuses and will continue to do so. But God will not give up on us, never has never will.

Now I know that sometimes all we can do is survive and make it through one more day, and that every moment of every day

we cannot be Isaiah raising our hand saying, *“Here I am send me!”* I get that. But there is absolutely NO reason why our collective response cannot be: *“Here WE are; send US!”* Because when YOU cannot answer a new call to justice or a new action of sharing God’s love, I can. And when I simply cannot add one more thing to my plate, YOU can.

Think about how birds migrate. They migrate in a V formation. The bird at the front breaks the wind, and bears the brunt of the load and uses the most energy, so that the birds behind it can rest and coast a bit, but then when that bird has given her all, they switch places so she can rest, and another takes the lead. Not all of us have to be leading the V formation all the time, we’d be exhausted if we did. We wouldn’t make it. But – all of us do have to take our place in the formation and be willing to rotate to the front when needed. Otherwise we’re all just flying on our own – making this whole “bringing the kin-dom of God to earth as

it is in heaven” thing way harder than it needs to be.

Just as birds in formation, we need not navigate the changes migrations of our lives alone. We share the load of Being the Church, of the Being the Body of Christ in the world today. Are we perfect? No. But God does not ask us to be perfect, God asks us to participate, to show up. God asks, “*Who can I send? Who will go for me? Who will be my presence in the world today?*”

And Calvary, I continue to be YOUR senior pastor, because collectively, we say together, “*You can send us, God, together as a strong witness of your love and justice, send us. Even when it’s uncomfortable and we’d rather not go, send us. Even when we wake up and realize how we have harmed so many and we have so much work to do, send us. Even when we disagree with the decisions our pastors make, send us. Even when we are still sorting out our theology, send us. Even when we are broken and even if we are broke, send us. Even*

though the world says the church is irrelevant, send us. Even though people say that the church is dying, send us. Even though many claim the church is full of hypocrites and sometimes we ARE hypocrites – send us. Even though people look around at all the suffering and death and devastation and say how can there even be a God – send us – even when that question is on OUR OWN lips, send us, O God, send us.”

We can come up with any excuse we want, but we cannot deny that when we see all around us that the world is not as God created it to be or desires it to be then that THAT means God is calling us. And the time is NOW to respond.

Isaiah’s story reminds us that God calls imperfect people in imperfect times to lead and serve in an imperfect world. There is never a time or situation when God does not NEED us to be the people of God, sharing the message of God’s justice, peace, hope, and love. And sometimes we have no idea what that will entail.

Remember this time last year?
We had NO idea what 2020
would bring; we couldn't have
dreamed up this kind of
ministry if we tried. But here
we are. Worshipping via
YouTube instead of in the
sanctuary. Housing families
experiencing homelessness in
hotels instead of in our
classrooms. Praying over Zoom
instead of in person. YES, we
are missing some of our
favorite parts of being church
together. AND, God is showing
us new and powerful ways we
ARE BEING the church
beyond what we could ever
imagine for ourselves.

Just with our worship viewing
numbers alone, we've reached
more people in 2020 than
we've reached in the past
several years combined. If that
is not God using our gifts to
spread God's message in the
world, then I don't know what
is. Is it how WE'D want God to
use us? Online instead of in
person? No, probably not for
most of us. But if we learn
anything from the verses that
follow Isaiah's call, it's not

about what WE want God's call
for us to be, it's about what
God's call IS for us in THIS
time and in THIS place and it's
about HOW we respond.

Today is Commitment Sunday.
Times are hard and the
economic impact of the
pandemic has turned some of
our lives upside down. Damon
and I have experienced this as
the hospitality industry has
taken a huge hit. We know
we're not the only ones. As we
sit down to fill our
Commitment Cards, we're
doing our best to not focus on
all the income we've lost this
year, but to hold on to all the
ways God has provided for us.
It's not easy. This year perhaps
even more than previous years,
I know we're all in different
financial positions Calvary, and
yet – like *every* year – we are
all in this together. Some of us
who have been flying more in
the back in the V formation,
may need to move forward
some because we realize we've
been giving comfortably, but
we can give more. And some of
us who have been leading the
way in our giving, may need to

move back because our
circumstances have changed.
This is why we are a
community. It's never about
who's in front or who's in
back; it's about finding your
place in the formation,
somewhere - anywhere, and
being willing to shift and move
as necessary, sticking together
through clear skies and storm
clouds alike.

God only knows what 2021
will bring. But we don't need to
know what's coming to know
that God IS calling US to be a
voice and witness of hope and
love and justice and healing in
the world. So let's HOLD ON
to our identity, our purpose,
each other, God, and our
commitments. Because if we
do, we'll be able to respond
humbly and courageously
together:

"Here we are, Lord, Send us!"

Amen.