

## **“Here Am I; Send Me”**

Salado UMC—27 May 2018: First Sunday after Pentecost

Preaching Text: Isaiah 6:1-8—Year B

Salado, Texas 76571

+++++

**“The price one pays for pursuing any profession or calling  
is an intimate knowledge of its ugly side”**

James Baldwin (1924—1987).

+++++

Tom Long, my friend who retired from teaching preaching at Candler School of Theology, claims that Jesus used often “confusing” parables. This use forces people to think deeper about the gospel’s meaning. In others words, Jesus did not want to have people grab the gospel too quickly because such a “quick grab” almost invariably results in a shallow faith that does not last. To boost this claim, Long tells the following story. George Buttrick, a fine preacher of an earlier generation, was on an airplane. He was furiously scribbling some notes for Sunday’s sermon.

The man sitting in the seat next to Buttrick noticed this and inquired, “Say, what are you working on there, sir.” Buttrick answered, “My sermon for Sunday—I’m a Christian preacher.”

“Oh,” the man replied. “Well, I don’t like to get caught up in the complexities of religion. I like to keep it simple. You know, ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’ The Golden Rule; that’s my religion.”

“I see,” said Buttrick, “and may I ask what do you do for a living?” The man responded, “Why, I’m an astronomer. I teach astrophysics at a university.”

“Ah, yes, astronomy,” Buttrick answered. “Well, I don’t like to get too caught up in the complexities of science, myself. ‘Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are.’ That’s my astronomy. Who would ever need any more than that, eh?”

Shallowness of any kind, whether in religion or science, or anything else for that matter, is not a good thing. So, this morning it befits us to give our lesson from the prophet Isaiah its proper hearing and reflection.

First, however, we note that Memorial Day and Labor Day are bookend holidays, marking the beginning and end of the summer holidays in the United States. These three-day weekends traditionally are times for celebration and family outings. Celebrated in most states on the last Monday in May, Memorial Day is a time to remember the U.S. men and woman who lost their lives serving their country. Originally known as Decoration Day, it was established in 1868 to commemorate the dead from the Civil War. Over the years it came to serve as a day to remember all U.S. men and women killed or missing in action in all wars.

In truth, Memorial Day is not a church holiday—we have our own day to remember the Saints which is called “All Saints Day”—but Memorial Day is the way our nation remembers those who gave their lives in our nation’s service. Other countries also have equivalents of Memorial Day. It is too bad that we have days like this, but war seems to be an inevitable part of nation-hood. Remembering the

war dead remains about the only way we have to celebrate the gift of life those people have given for the ideals, we as a nation, have identified to lift up and commemorate.

“Wars are not acts of God. They are caused by man, by man-made institutions, by the way in which man has organized his society. What man has made, man can change” [A Speech at Arlington National Cemetery (Memorial Day, 1945) by Frederick Moore Vinson (1890-1953)].

You no doubt remember the name Timothy McVeigh. He was convicted of bombing the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on 19 April 1995. McVeigh was executed on 11 June 2001 in Indiana—the first federal execution since 1963. There is no way to understand McVeigh’s act as anything other than an act of war against the United States. Like most wars, many of the victims were innocent of anything other than being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Perhaps, this is the one of the main things irreconcilable about war—the wrong people often provide their lives. It is for this reason that the church, from the beginning, has categorically opposed war. Certainly, from St. Augustine on, there have been valiant theological attempts to justify war. One example is the “Just War Theory.” Yet, generally, church tradition has universally opposed war in all its guises. The church has another way to oppose violence by our society and it is in the habitual acts of worship and in prayer.

In the book of Acts, there is an example, from many which we could lift up, of how the docile church fought against overwhelming odds against the great political powers of her day. Hear this account from Luke’s Acts:

**About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. [2] He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword. [3] After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. (This was during the festival of Unleavened Bread.) [4] When he had seized him, he put him in prison and handed him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending to bring him out to the people after the Passover. [5] While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him (Acts 12:1-5).**

Often prayer and worship look hopelessly naive and ineffective, but the church has stuck to its metaphorical guns. The church preaches that our prayers are far more effective than taking up arms. Non-violent resistance both to governmental and political violence are traditional hallmarks of our faith. Today, Memorial Day, is a good day to remember this. For all the wars fought, won, or lost, one thing we can say for certain—more wars will come. Maybe Jesus knew something we tend to forget when he said, “But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also . . .” (Matthew 5:39).

Let me give you a personal example of how the church’s thinking goes with respect to prayer and worship and please forgive my impertinence. As a natural being, I know how to deal with my enemies. I have been trained. I understand. We live in a world where old ways of thinking—an eye for an eye, etc.—is well-established. We can detect this thinking everywhere. Thus, when an enemy of mine does me wrong, for example by saying an untruth about me or by ascribing to me nefarious motives of which I had not even thought, then I do know how to respond.

But when someone forgives me when I am clearly in the wrong, I’m not sure what to do with that. Perhaps, you too are like me, you would almost rather people to treat you badly because then you are not bereft of your defenses. These Christian acts of forgiveness symbolizing grace and mercy leave us

defenseless. We do not know how to respond. This is the idea that Jesus and the church have had for centuries about the power of prayer and worship which empower Christians to forgive their enemies.

The New Testament writers had a contemporary named Epictetus. Initially a Roman slave, Epictetus gained his freedom, became a philosopher, won patronage from Emperor Domitian, and later banished from Rome to Asia Minor. He wrote the *Enchiridion*, a classic of the Stoic philosophy—one of Christianity's early and attractive competitors. The book was a manual of instruction for officers in the Roman army. Yet, its focus was not on warfare tactics. Rather, it offered an attitude/philosophy of a soldiers' life. It guided soldiers' actions according to natural law to maintain control. Perhaps, this is what our Bible is: a manual about how Christians live when residing in a battle zone (C. Freeman Sleeper, *The Victorious Christ: A Study of the Book of Revelation*, WJKP, 1996, p. 54). When one is at war with the meanings of a culture in which one finds oneself in, then we must prepare for battle. But the battle is not violent. It is rather a spiritual battle—already won for us on the cross by the God we worship.

On this Memorial Day weekend, as we gather with family/friends to celebrate the freedom won for us by others, may we also remember that we too are called into a battle ourselves. It is a battle that puts our highest ideals and beliefs on the line as we attempt to live out lives that reflect the gospel of Jesus Christ. One way to do this is to remember the awesome power of our God. Isaiah put it like this:

**[6:1] 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!” (Isaiah 6:1-8).**

This text reminds us that we worship and a God who calls us grander and bigger and more awesome than any narrow or parochial problem we will ever meet. This my friends is worth remembering on any Memorial Day!

David Neil Mosser, Salado UMC, Salado, Texas