

*God's Call: Whom Shall I Send?*

**Isaiah 6**

John Breon

God's call comes to us in a specific time—the time we're living in. God calls us right where we are right now.

God called Isaiah in a particular time and place. Isaiah lived during a time of change and upheaval. His homeland was threatened by the major world power then—Assyria. The Assyrian Empire was expanding and was approaching the territory of Israel and Judah.

Isaiah says that his call to prophetic ministry came in a specific year—the year that King Uzziah died. Uzziah had reigned for fifty-two years and was basically a good king who followed the ways of the LORD. There was one time he had entered the temple and presumed to offer incense that only priests were authorized to offer. Uzziah was then struck with leprosy and spent the rest of his years in isolation. During those years, his son may have ruled in his name.

So Isaiah's world was upended and his nation's leadership was changing. We've been living in a time of drastic change for quite a while now. Technology changes so rapidly that it's hard to keep up. Scientific discoveries give us the ability to do things that previous generations couldn't have dreamed of. And that forces us to think in new ways to try to deal with ethical questions previous generations didn't face. Our society has changed and keeps changing in dramatic ways. The world shrinks as communication gets faster and more efficient. At the same time, the world becomes more divided in some ways. We may mourn the loss of the way things used to be or we may be excited by the changes we see. Either way, rapid and continual change can make us dizzy.

Maybe all this makes us ripe for a fresh vision of God and a renewed call from God like Isaiah received. God comes to us and calls us in our time and place. God came to Isaiah and called him in his time and place. With nations in turmoil and the ruler of his nation dying, Isaiah had a vision of God who is greater than any nations or rulers.

Isaiah may have been in the temple, in worship, when he had this vision of the Lord. He certainly saw the Lord in terms of the temple. God was on a throne, ruling. God was high and exalted. The hem of God's robe filled the temple. That shows how great God is and that God can't be contained in the building set aside for worshiping him.

Isaiah sees *seraphim*, six-winged creatures that fly around God's throne. This is the only place in Scripture where seraphim are mentioned. The word "seraph" describes something that burns or shines. A similar word describes the "fiery serpents" that attacked the Israelites in the wilderness. In Isaiah's vision, these burning, shining creatures fly around God's throne, reflecting and declaring God's glory and holiness. Repeating "holy" three times shows the intensity of God's holiness. The seraphim declare that the whole earth is full of God's glory. The hem of God's robe fills the temple, but the glory of God fills the earth. There's no place to escape God's presence.

We tend to think of God's presence as gentle and comforting. Not Isaiah. He was terrified. When he realized he was in the presence of God, he cried out, "Woe is me! I am ruined! I am lost!" Why'd he react that way? He was not only aware of God's presence, but he was aware of his own sin. He was convicted by the presence of God. He acknowledged his own sinfulness. This was expressed in terms of speaking—"I am a man of unclean lips"—because he was a prophet who would speak for God. How can he speak for God if he's a man of unclean lips? He also recognizes his solidarity with his people, admitting that they are a people of unclean lips. Lips or speaking here symbolizes motivations and actions, all that makes up a whole life. This might remind us of Jesus' saying that "the mouth speaks what the heart is full of" (Matthew 12:34).

Isaiah knows that humans can't see God because God is too holy and glorious to behold with human eyes. And yet, he has seen the King, the LORD Almighty. After King Uzziah died, Isaiah saw the true King, the LORD. And he realizes that he is undone. He figures he will die at any moment from exposure to such holiness.

Aren't we sometimes uncomfortable in God's presence? God's glory exposes our sin and God's holiness repels our sin. In God's presence we

become aware of our sin—our disobedience, attitudes, actions and inaction that show how we try to live without God and run life on our own. We don't like being reminded that we're sinners. We want to feel good, not feel convicted. So we may try to ignore or cover up or dilute God's presence. We may try to avoid it and run from it. But we can't run from God. When we think we're running from God, we run into him. So maybe we try to limit God's presence and contain it. We try to box God in. But the whole earth is full of his glory. We can't keep God boxed in. He always gets out and we have to face him—in nature, in the lives of other people, in the Bible, in worship, in silence, in all kinds of surprising places.

C. S. Lewis describes how he abandoned Christian faith and lived for several years without believing in God. Then God began to close in on him. Lewis was mainly interested in literature and poetry. He discovered that so many of the writers whose work he admired turned out to be Christians. In reading some of them, he didn't know what he was letting himself in for. "A young man who wishes to remain a sound Atheist cannot be too careful of his reading. There are traps everywhere" (*Surprised by Joy* 191). Lewis eventually lived out his call from God as a professor and as one of the finest writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

A more recent example is a man named Mike McHargue. He goes by "Science Mike" on his blog and website. He believed in Jesus as a young boy, he grew up in the church and was active in it until he was a young adult. Then, through a series of experiences and questions, he quit believing. For a couple of years, he pretended that he was still a Christian—going to church and teaching Sunday School. But privately he no longer believed. He joined others online to discuss their unbelief. He eventually came out as an unbeliever. Then, through another series of events, he attended a conference of Christian leaders. They welcomed him and his questions. At the end of the conference, they had a Communion service and Mike decided to participate. As he took Communion, he heard Jesus speak to him. Later he went out to the beach and tried to pray. The waves rushed up to him and he felt the presence of God. He continued to struggle with belief and how he does believe is different from what he grew up with. But now his call seems to be to help people at least begin to explore faith

and see that science and faith can get along (*Finding God in the Waves: How I Lost My Faith and Found it Again Through Science*, chapter 7, "The Horse Leaves the Barn").

Where has God come to you? Where does God come to you, making himself known and calling to you? Will we keep trying to run and hide, or will we join Isaiah in confessing our sin? Maybe we'll fall to our knees with Simon Peter when he first saw Jesus' miraculous power and said, "Lord, depart from me. I'm a sinful man" (Luke 5:8).

After Isaiah acknowledges his sin, he is cleansed. A seraph takes a burning coal from the altar, flies to Isaiah, touches his mouth with the burning coal, and says, "See this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." Remember the unclean lips represented his sin. Now his sin is blotted out, forgiven.

In his vision, Isaiah receives a symbolic cleansing from sin. In the New Covenant, we receive cleansing from sin in a different way. 1 John sums it up well:

If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1:7-9)

The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, applied to us by the Holy Spirit, cleanses us from sin. God deals with our guilt and our shame. In Christ, God "flies to a broken people and offers forgiveness and new life" (Patrick Johnson, *Worship that Sends*, <https://missionalpreaching.com/2015/05/27/worship-that-sends-trinity-b-isaiah-61-8>, accessed 1/24/17).

The salvation God gives us includes forgiveness, but it's much more. We receive forgiveness at the beginning of our journey with Jesus. It introduces us to new life in him. We need to keep receiving forgiveness all along the way. At the same time, we find grace to help us overcome sin. We learn to stay away from what tempts us. We always pray, "Forgive us our sins," and we ask God to keep us from tests that would undermine us. We

are given new life in Christ to walk in his ways and do his will. By grace, holiness increases and sin diminishes in our lives.

So Isaiah sees God and he sees himself alienated from God. He receives the great grace of forgiveness. Then he receives a mission from God. He hears God saying in the heavenly council, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"

Isaiah says, "Here I am. Send me." And God sends Isaiah to take God's message to the people of Israel and Judah. But God warns Isaiah that the people won't listen to him. In fact, Isaiah's ministry will do the opposite of what a prophet's ministry usually does. It will cause people to turn away. It will prevent them from repenting. Not always, not forever. But some of what God did through Isaiah was to intensify the spiritual insensitivity of people who had already started to harden their hearts toward God.

Isaiah is troubled by this aspect of his call, but he seems to realize it's not all God wants him to do. He asks, "How long, Lord?" How long will people resist? How long do I have to do this? When can I see some positive results?

God's call and our response don't make life easy. We're not guaranteed success even when we do what God calls us to do. At least not success the way we usually measure it. Still, when we hear God's call, we need to respond.

Frederick Buechner retells Isaiah's experience in an interesting way:

There were banks of candles flickering in the distance and clouds of incense thickening the air with holiness and stinging his eyes, and high above him, as if it had always been there but was only now seen for what it was (like a face in the leaves of a tree or a bear among the stars), there was the Mystery Itself whose gown was the incense and the candles a dusting of gold at the hem. There were winged creatures shouting back and forth the way excited children shout to each other when dusk calls them home, and the whole vast, reeking place started to shake beneath his feet like a wagon going over cobbles, and he cried out, "O God, I am done for! I am foul of mouth and the member of a foul-mouthed race. With my own two eyes I

have seen him. I'm a goner and sunk." Then one of the winged things touched his mouth with fire and said, "There, it will be all right now," and the Mystery Itself said, "Who will it be?" and with charred lips he said, "Me," and Mystery said "GO."

Mystery said, "Go give the deaf Hell till you're blue in the face and go show the blind Heaven till you drop in your tracks because they'd sooner eat ground glass than swallow the bitter pill that puts roses in the cheeks and a gleam in the eye. Go do it."

Isaiah said, "Do it till when?"

Mystery said, "Till Hell freezes over."

Mystery said, "Do it till the cows come home."

And that is what a prophet does for a living, and starting from the year that King Uzziah died when he saw and heard all these things, Isaiah went and did it. (*Listening to Your Life* 265; also in *Peculiar Treasures*)

When we receive the grace of forgiveness, we also receive a call from God. Jesus told Simon Peter, "Don't be afraid. From now on you will fish for people" (Lk 5:10). Forgiveness sets us up for service. We proclaim God's message where we are, in our time. We embody the presence of God so people will be confronted with God's holiness and glory.

There are many ways we can do this. I was looking at some old notes on this passage from a sermon I preached on it when I was in high school. I said then that I want to communicate faith to the people around me. I was praying one day about how to reach people at my school. I said, "Lord, what can I do? I can't just preach to them." But just a few days later, the principal asked me if I would speak to the student body at a Christmas assembly. And I preached the gospel using the Christmas story that day.

We don't tell God what we can and can't do. We make ourselves available to God and seize the opportunities God gives to be a witness, to serve, to help, to care, to make God's presence known in the world.

The world still needs prophets, courageous souls willing to deliver the message "Thus says the Lord" to a society that is quick to block out

divine words. But the world also needs teachers and counselors, preachers and evangelists, healers and helpers, as well as people of vision and energy and integrity in every line of work that is being performed today. So be a computer technician with compassion. A sales clerk with Christian vision. A school [teacher] with a sense of discipleship. ...

When you have a vision of God, you cannot not do something. Painters with a vision paint. Composers compose. Poets poet. Christians "go and tell" and show and tell. That what [we've] been forgiven to do. (*Homiletics Online* 2003)

Once again, how is God calling you at this time, in the place where you live and work and relate to people?