

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, June 14, 2009, Second Sunday after Pentecost, dedicated to the blessed memory of Lillian Marie Thomas Brownfield, my father, Herman C. Ahrens, Jr., on his 85th birthday, Natalie and Bill Wright, our 2009 Lay Leaders' Award Winners and sojourners to a old/new land called Massachusetts, to the Youth Mission team headed to West Virginia, and always to the glory of God!

“Here We Are! Send Us!”

Isaiah 6:1-8; John 3:1-16

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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The scene of the prophet's call in Isaiah 6 is a mysterious meeting of God and prophet which we deem "The Call." Confrontation between king and prophet, tension between faith in God and political expediency, flying beasts and mystery itself have been brought into the holiest of holies – the temple of Jerusalem. Here God is revealed and the prophet finds his breath to speak.

Frederick Buechner describes Isaiah's call this 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 the trees or a bear in 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 the dust calls them home, and the whole vast wreaking place

began to shake like a wagon going over cobbles and he cried out, "O God, I am done for! I am foul of mouth and a member of a foulmouthed race. With my own two eyes, I have seen Him. I am a goner and sunk."

Then one of the winged things touched his mouth with fire and said, "There. It will be alright now." And 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 until you are blue in the face and go show the blind Heaven till you drop in your tracks because they would sooner eat ground glass than swallow the bitter pill of 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 that year when King Uzziah died and when he saw and heard all these things, Isaiah went and did it." (Frederick Beuchner, Peculiar Treasures, San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1982, pp. 55-56)

Out of the flickering candlelight and smoke, Seraphim and Cherubim fly, burning coals of fire cleanse the mouth of the prophet and mystery – an often forgotten and neglected presence and voice in our times – speaks to the prophet of God and the prophet answers and goes to serve! There is nothing simple or easy about the years of prophecy ahead. People don't rise up and go as prophets. They are cut out of a different fabric and serve for times such as this!

In a quieter scene many years later, in the dark of night, also in Jerusalem, God is revealed again to a teacher of the law named Nicodemus. He is seeking to understand the mystery of God's incarnation – that this, God's revelation of Godself in human form.

Nicodemus had heard Jesus speak and he wants a peace that passes understanding. In a nutshell, he wants what Jesus has – the Spirit of the Living God. This man who is bound-up in laws and rules desperately needs The Holy Spirit!

Jesus could have said to Nicodemus, “To get what I have you need to lighten up. You need to open up! You need to let go and let God rule your life, instead of trying to Lord over every else in your path.” He doesn’t say that. Instead, he says, “You need to be **BORN ANEW.**”

To be “born anew” meant (and still means) to receive God’s kingdom into your life – that is to allow God to create in your life and in the lives of those around you a place where God’s will (not yours) is done. It means to surrender your will to God, to be obedient to God and accept what is the way, the truth and the life of God. It means to accept eternal life in your daily life. That is, to embrace each day as a gift from God that reflects something of God’s kingdom coming on earth as in heaven. It means to live your life in the way of Jesus, a way of humility, love and justice.

Unlike Isaiah, who responded, “Here I am! Send Me,” we do not know how Nicodemus responded on the night in which he “stole away to Jesus” (as the African-American spiritual puts it). We are left with the call and an uncertain response. But, from his example, we know many millions of people have given their lives to Christ and received a blessing and an anointing from above!

Calling and responding. Coming and going. Arriving and sending.

These encounters with God are ever present in our lives. I am most encouraged when I see this humble opening to the spirit of God in our children and youth. Just this week, I was touched deeply by the response of two young people to the call to go and serve – Wyatt Smeal and Heather Giffin. Wyatt is headed to South Dakota to be a teacher somewhere on the Lakota reservations for the next two years

through Teach for America. You may know Wyatt as the young man who built our church's harpsichord, along with our beloved friend, now gone, Ben Bechtel. Wyatt and his parents, Lisa Morris and Kent Shimeall, have been worshipping with us since Ben's memorial service.

He is one of 4,100 Teach For America teachers selected this year from an applicant pool of 35,000 graduates. In some colleges, as many as 20% of their 2009 graduates applied to Teach for America. **"Here I am! Send me!"**

Heather is headed to United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities to begin her studies in the Master of Divinity Program there. Three years from now, God willing, Heather will be ordained as a United Church of Christ minister. Her emphasis and passion is to study Native American spirituality and move closer to Native Americas in Minnesota and the Great Plains. On Wednesday, Heather met with the Church and Ministry Department of our association and handled their initial questions about her call to ministry. She spoke of social justice and her lifelong sense of serving God. Heather has felt the call to serve God through ordained ministry in Christ's church for almost as long as I have known her. **"Here I am! Send me."**

What is it that causes the best and brightest of our young men and women to rise from comfort and success to go to the poorest (and coldest!) places in our nation to serve those in greatest need? When I speak with Heather and Wyatt I get the feeling that they take seriously the two commandments of scripture that Jesus lifts up as No. 1 and No. 2: "To Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself."

I have the same feeling as I witness Matt Goetz, Preston Cook, Ryan Weddle and other men and women serving our nation in the military and reserves. I get an overwhelming sense that they are there out of love: love of God, love of humanity, and love of our nation. **Here I am! Send me!**

You don't have to be young and mobile to answer God's call to serve!

Years ago, I knew a woman who I called the “Shut-in Freedom Fighter.” She was 80 and had lost her ability to move around.

I met her on a nursing home visit with one of my members at North Congregational UCC. Her nursing home tray was stacked high with envelopes, stamps, and stationary. She had neat piles of Amnesty International appeals for prisoners of conscience stacked on her bed. For years, I had worked for the abolition of torture. I was very familiar with AI and its Nobel Peace Prize-winning efforts on behalf of men and women worldwide who were imprisoned because of their faith, their politics or their prophetic witness in oppressive societies.

When I asked about her efforts she said, “I used to sit here feeling useless. I couldn’t get up and go anywhere. I was consigned to this room and this chair. Then I found out about Amnesty International and their work for prisoners of conscience. Now I write 25 letters a day appealing for the release of these remarkable men and women. Since I started, 10 have been released.”

With tears in eyes, she pointed to the wall and said, “One has written back to me, thanking me. Now I get up each day feeling needed. I pray for each prisoner. I feel like they are family to me. I will keep writing til I die.” She was a shut-in freedom fighter. **Here I am! Send me!**

How about you? What is God calling you to do? How can you serve God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength?

Today, we send 21 people in different directions – all with our love and blessings. We send Bill and Natalie back home to our Congregational heartland – Massachusetts. We will miss them. But they will always be in our hearts and minds. Some of us who are particularly dehydrated here in Ohio and in search of oceans and seas will make our way to the Wright coast and their place.

We also send 19 youth and adults to West Virginia to help rebuild lives in the mountains there. It will be an adventure of love and service. I guarantee each of us will be changed by our time with people who are strangers today and will be friends by next Sunday. What a great and amazing God we serve!

Calling and responding. Coming and going. Arriving and sending.

“Here we are! Send us!” Amen.

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