

“The Call of God in Your Life”

Isaiah 6:1-13; I Corinthians 15:1-11, Luke 5:1-11

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens
Senior Minister

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From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, February 6, 2022, Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, dedicated to The Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, Jr. and to the memory of Papa Kee and Thomas Merton and to the men and women in my life who have overcome racial prejudice and hate to become witnesses of love and justice and always to the glory of God!

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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 call of God to follow is a disruptive, disorderly, disturbing, odd and mystical thing. It sometimes happens under the cover of night or at the break of dawn. It happens when two world views collide and a new one is formed. It happens when we are outside the main gate listening-in to the conversation of others. And then, while in the process of doing this rather strange and covert act, we overhear others speaking of something that speaks to us. We burst in as though it is about us – like some force is pulling us into discovery beyond all rational ability to stay outside our overhearing.

The call of God to follow comes when a core value, a deep belief, a consistent theme of our life's story is touched on, hammered on, or heard anew for the first time. This call often supersedes our protests as the call's recipient. We sometimes run from it, sometimes ignore it, sometimes openly and angrily or frightfully challenge God's call. But, having received the still small voice of divine reassurances, we accept what is already planned and true in the heart and mind of the Almighty. God's call often starts in the center of something old and emerges as something new. And, interestingly enough, the call rarely comes at the beginning of our story, although the beginning, in the mind of God, has had the call written in it all the time.

The call stories of God's prophets and of other servants of God are very private and individual matters and yet so many of them are written down for all to read. For Isaiah (in today's text), for Moses (Ex. 3:1-4:17), for Gideon (Judges 6:11-24), Jeremiah (Jer. 1:4-10) and Ezekiel (1-3), for disciples in Luke's Gospel and Nicodemus in John's Gospel, the call is direct and then when received can more gently land with reassurances. And the resistance of those whose stories we read is not so much linked to hard-headed personalities as it is to the overwhelmingly awesome experience of standing in the presence of God. For the divinely chosen ones, it is part of the office, part of the divine verification process, to feel unworthy in one way or another.

Today, Isaiah walks to the edge of the Holy of Holies. He stands just outside the gates of the Temple and sees the six-winged Seraphim gloriously present and the ark of the covenant passing by. He smells the smoke from the offering filling the whole house of the Lord. Isaiah's woeful cry is like a confession of sin and an expression of mourning for himself and his people. He knows that he is unclean. He knows that he is not worthy to stand before God. Yet, with grace

and powerful gentleness, the Seraphim touches his lips and cleanses him by deed, for the word. He pronounces Isaiah cleansed, removed of guilt, forgiven of sin.

I don't know about you, but all too many days, I feel just like Isaiah – unworthy to do the will of God, and certainly to speak the word of God. I feel like my unclean mouth is a reflection of my unclean heart. I do not feel that I am good enough, pure enough, honest enough or clean enough to speak on behalf of God about anything – anywhere. And in my heart, I pray for God to cleanse me. I don't need a six-winged Seraphim. I would be happy if it were a two-winged dove of peace or even a smiling child on a bike riding by to cleanse me! Just a sign, something or some reliable human messenger who could say, "You are cleansed. You are forgiven. You are redeemed (not merely redeemable, but `redeemed'). You are okay."

How about you? Can you relate to Isaiah, too?

It is often by listening in, by overhearing the stories of others, that this cleansing, this forgiveness, this redemption comes. It can come in a simple word of blessed assurance. It can come with a call from a friend or even someone you don't really know, or someone with whom you have struggled. It can come from note in your mailbox, your text stream or email box. It comes unexpectedly and just in time. It can come when a story of someone else's struggle with something close to your life hits home – someone who has faced and overcome cancer and or other health challenges, eating addictions, drug addictions, suicidal ideations, deep grief, anxiety or depression. It can come when you are feeling the full weight of caregiving and wondering if there is anyone there just for you – and that somebody shows up. It can come when you are stuck in your loneliness, separation and alienation and someone simply shows up.

You overhear or experience – healing. You overhear or experience – grace. Through the crack in the wall, you encounter the transformation of faith and you feel the love of God.

Like Isaiah, standing outside the gate of the Temple, witnessing miracles growing out of suffering, you feel just strong enough to step inside the gate. And although you don't feel worthy, you do feel loved. And although you are overhearing stories of rebirth and the rekindling of God's gifts within you, when you hear God speak in the midst of all of it, it is you who cries out, "Here I am . . . Send me!"

And whether you are sent or simply wonder off like Don Quixote in search of the windmills of salvation, you become hopeful that in your going, the direction you are heading will become clear. As you step out, move forward, and mount your horse heading to battle with the dragons, it is in those first steps that God's miracles begin to unfold.

As the lips of the prophet are touched by burning coals of fire, we learn that the Spirit can touch our lips as well. As the fishermen, turned disciples, drop their nets based on faith, hope and love – and not their calculated knowledge of the water and the fish, we learn that we too can drop our nets into the water and trust that Christ will take care of filling the nets.

As you turn to Christ's table of grace and move into the days ahead, pay attention to the call of God in your life. As you do, carry this prayer with you.

Written by Thomas Merton in his spiritual classic, *Thoughts in Solitude*, the prayer calls us forward to a road we do not know:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going, I do not see the road ahead of me, I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, I will trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.

(From *Thoughts in Solitude* as found in *Through the Year with Thomas Merton*, ed. by Thomas P. McDonnell, Image Books, Garden City, NY, January 4, 1985, p. 4.)