

“Here I am, send me”

You may have noticed that the Old Testament passages we have read today and last Sunday are the call stories of Isaiah and Jeremiah. Call stories in the Bible most often tell us how an ordinary person is called into God’s service. These two were prophets; that is people who speak the word of God to mortals. Prophets are not fortunetellers, seers or astrologers. They may foretell an event, but only as a warning to heed God’s call to repentance.

I find call stories compelling and instructive. They tell us a lot about how prophets view themselves and their relationship with God. They tell us what makes one acceptable to God. They also tell us how the person views themselves in relationship to other people, and what they think a pious and faithful life entails.

Who do you suppose is the Bible’s prototype for a prophet? [Listen for responses hint: an early biblical figure]. The proto-prophet is Moses. This may seem strange at first; it did to me, but look at Moses story. Moses was in self-imposed exile tending sheep for his father-in-law when he encounters a burning bush. When he investigates he sees that the bush may be burning but it is not being consumed. Out of the bush comes the voice of God.

God gives Moses a job to do on God’s behalf. Moses turns down the job, saying he is unfit to do speak for God because of a speech impediment. God does not relent and says that Aaron will be Moses’ spokesman. Moses yields and returns to Egypt. There he speaks God’s word to Pharaoh. He eventually leads the Hebrew people out of captivity through a 40-year journey to the Promised Land. Along the way he serves as God intermediary to the people. Despite hardships, rebellions, war, law giving and much more the people will make it to the land of milk and honey.

We heard Jeremiah’s call story last week. In it Jeremiah takes a similar tack as Moses for not accepting God’s call, He says, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” Instead of having a speech impediment Jeremiah insists he is too young. God offers encouragement to Jeremiah and then touches his mouth saying, “Now I have put my words in your mouth.” These words will give Jeremiah the authority to build up or to destroy.

Today we heard Isaiah’s call story. The method is different but the results are the same. When Isaiah encounter’s the Lord he expresses awe and dread. He knows that an encounter with God can mean death. He says, “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!” Isaiah’s problem is not his ability to speak or his age, rather what he has already spoken was impure. Being in the presence of the Lord certainly means he will die.

In response a seraph (that is a six-winged angel) takes a coal from the altar fire and touches it to Isaiah’s lips. While it was hot enough to burn the seraph’s hands, for he held it with tongs, it does not burn Isaiah’s mouth. Instead it cleanses him from his sins. Now he may speak the word of God. These three incidents make it clear that when God calls “no” is never an acceptable answer.

Our final call story is embedded in the Gospel passage about Jesus' teaching on the shores of Lake Gennesaret (AKA Lake Tiberius or Lake Galilee). You may recall a different call story for Peter, that story is in Mark¹ and Matthew². Luke tells it differently by having Jesus perform a miracle that so stuns Simon Peter he falls down in despair. He requests that Jesus to leave him alone, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" It is a moving scene that presages Simon's recognition of Jesus as Messiah later in the Gospel.³ But instead of leaving Simon Peter he calls him to follow.

These call stories are powerful. They are also part of a tradition and a typology. However, that does not make them meaningful for us today, at least not on their face. You might imagine that I could tell you my call story or the stories of other priests, monks or deacons. I most certainly could, but I am more interested in your call story.

If your response is that you don't have a call story or that you are not worthy to be called, then you have fitted yourself into the first part of these typical call stories. That is the denial of worthiness to be called. If we talked I bet you might unearth other parts of your story that also fit into the biblical typology.

We all have a call. The call might not be to ordained ministry or prophecy, but it is certainly a call to discipleship. We have all been called to follow Jesus. We have each in our own way and with our own gifts been called to be part of the body of Christ. We make many promises when baptized. We promise to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers; to persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord; to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, seeking and serving Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves; and to strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being.⁴

Your call is there. Each of us is called to fulfill those promises as best we can. We will do it differently because we are different with different gifts. Some may preach while others might teach. Some might offer hospitality or charity, and another might be a missionary. One might design hospitals, churches or schools and another might build them or raise money for their construction or give toward them. We might cook, knit or sing. There is no limit to how we can serve God. The needs of the world are boundless and require all of us to step up.

Your call many not have an attendant miracle, a theophany, or seraphs, but you have a call. Pray on it. Pray on how to fulfill it. Seek God's guidance or the guidance of your fellow Christians. God needs you and me to respond. When God calls out to you the response God longs to hear is, "Here I am, send me."

¹ Mark 1:16

² Matthew 4:12

³ Luke 9:18-20

⁴ The Book of Common Prayer, 1979, pp. 304-305