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## Call and Response

Isaiah 6:1-8 and Luke 5:1-11

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What do you want to be when you grow up? This was an easy question to answer when I was younger – when I wanted to be a poet and inventor and rescuer of endangered species. But as my classmates and I approach graduation, the question has shifted to “What do you want to do next year”, and our parents and professors really do want to know what we’re planning. So especially this year, vocation has been consistently on my mind. Not because of an intellectual or spiritual interest so much as a palpable yearning, common to many of my classmates, to know what to do next.

The uneasiness of uncertainty and desire to know what’s next are certainly not unique to students. Many of us, in all stages of life, may have wished that our future would be suddenly revealed. With smoke and angels in a holy place such as this, or from a voice saying, “Don’t be afraid. From now on you will....be fishers of men” The clarity of these scriptural callings seems appealing, but they are usually not the basis for my ideal situation when I say I want to learn about being called, and responding to a call. This fall, I was actually just hoping that God would point out one job application, help me submit it on erecruiting, and set me down some path that I’ve really been planning all along.

But this doesn’t seem to be the way it works. Much more than a nudge toward the right job, much more than an affirmation of ones gifts and talents, God’s call compels us to discipleship. Our scripture passages for today, the commission of Isaiah in Isaiah 6 and the call of three disciples in Luke 5 offer two striking accounts of God revealing vocations to his people. In these examples, we see that, though God’s call may confuse us, and may not be easy, it is to be answered with courage and faith.

Rather than just suggesting a good job or a nice new city to move to, God surprises his people by calling them to remarkable, radical, difficult tasks. His choices are almost ironic. He calls Abraham, an old man with no children, to found a nation, Moses, an ineloquent speaker to stand up to Pharaoh, Mary, a teenaged unwed girl, to give birth to his Son. To the people he's calling, God's call doesn't make a lot of sense. If for no other reason, because they don't feel worthy of such an appointment.

Consider Isaiah. He sees the Lord sitting on a throne, and the whole entire temple is too small to contain just the train of his robe. There are angels everywhere – seraphs with six wings calling out “Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD Almighty.” As smoke fills the temple and the doorposts and thresholds are shaking, Isaiah is struck by the magnitude of God's glory, and, in contrast, by the depth of his own inadequacy.

“Woe is me” he cries out “I am ruined – for I am a man of unclean lips.” Isaiah's humility, his recognition of his own sinfulness, reiterates that God is the Almighty one, and that God doesn't need a perfect agent to carry out his will. It reminds us that Isaiah didn't look like the best man for the job. And perhaps it reminds us that, before we can be open to really listening for God's call in our lives, we also have to call out “Woe is me.” We have to confess our shortcomings and admit that, without God, we're really not good enough for the job either.

So God calls ordinary people to exceptional tasks. It's nice to know that shortcomings and weaknesses don't render us ineligible for God's work, but that's only the beginning. Not only does God seem to call people beyond the normal scope of their individual abilities, he calls them to challenging tasks.

And this is where we may falter. To be an instrument of peace is no easy task. For Isaiah to recognize and confess his unclean lips was not enough; God had to transform him into a capable prophet. This he does with the refiner's fire. An angel flew to Isaiah with a live coal in his hand, taken with tongs straight from the altar and touched it to Isaiah's unclean mouth. His sin was taken away to prepare him for the task at hand, but it wasn't painless.

And so I wonder, if I say “Here I am” to God, will a burning coal be required before I can best serve him?

The necessity of purification is not a punishment. It’s the rough scrubbing and sloughing off of old grime, the snapping of a light stick so it can glow, the quick chill of the waters of baptism. Not for our harm, but for our flourishing, we’re made to confess and be changed before we can serve. In this act of purification, God prepares the unprepared and sanctifies the unholy to do his work.

Despite the trial – despite the fact that Isaiah will be called to deliver a harsh message to calloused, confused people – despite the need to prophesy to unhearing people til the cities lie ruined and the land is utterly forsaken, Isaiah offers himself. “Here I am. Send me.”

Men and women have more recently repeated these words. Among them is German theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, called at a young age to ministry and later to the German Resistance movement against Nazism. Bonhoeffer bravely spoke out against the Fuhrer from the beginning of Hilter’s regime. He helped found the forerunner to the Confessing Church, a movement of Christian opposition to Hitler, and maintained that Christ was the only head of the church, denouncing the idolatrous devotion to Hitler. Though given opportunities to move to London and New York, he returned to Germany each time and endured harassment from Nazis. Called to risk everything, he spoke out with strength and conviction. A close friend of his recalled, “Dietrich himself was a martyr many times before he died” Bonhoeffer faithfully opposed injustice until his execution in a concentration camp. In one of his letters from prison he wrote, “I am sure of God’s hand and guidance... You must never doubt that I am thankful and glad to go the way which I am being led.”

How can we explain this? What compels this courage?

By the shores of Lake Gennesaret, three fishermen followed Jesus' instructions, despite their hours of unsuccessful fishing, and tossed their nets into the sea. To their utter surprise, they caught so many fish that their nets began to break. Recognizing the glory of the man before him, Peter fell down and, like Isaiah, confessed his unworthy nature as a sinful man. Jesus assuaged the disciples' fear and revealed their calling – a vocation which, upon first hearing, must have been confusing to the fishermen. “From now on”, Jesus said, “you will catch people.”

So these three men – Peter, James, and John, whose entire livelihood was fishing, pulled their boats up on the shore, left everything, and followed him. Let's not gloss over this move. They didn't ask questions? Didn't try to haul all those fish to the market first? They didn't try to negotiate a part-time position fishing for men while hanging on to their old profession? I'm not one to talk about making quick decisions, even if I had just dragged in so many fish that my nets broke, I may have wanted to sit down and jot down a pro and con list. Maybe outline my possibilities and rank order my priorities. Not Peter, James, and John. They left everything and followed him.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer recalls this moment in a discussion of grace. “Costly grace” he says, “is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows Him.” Contrasted to “cheap grace”, which is “forgiveness without repentance, baptism without discipline, communion without confession, and grace without the cross”, Costly grace recognizes the need for the refiner's fire, for the live coal in the temple, for the personal confessions of Isaiah and Peter. Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship* is so convicting that I find it almost hard to read. Knowing his background and incredible self sacrifice, his vision of discipleship seems like a lot to sign up for. Though his challenges may seem overwhelming, his understanding of costly grace illuminates God's call and our response. “Such Grace” says Bonhoeffer, “is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ ... it is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life... It is costly because it compels a man to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow Him; it is grace because Jesus says, “My yoke is easy and My burden light.”

This past summer I worked on a Global Health project in Thomassique, Haiti. I was blessed to meet some incredible people both while in Thomassique, and once I returned at a conference in Durham. The Haiti Connection Conference, here in North Carolina, resulted in my inclusion on a list serve of physicians, nurses, international organizations, public health outreach projects, clinics – a variety of people in Haiti and in the states. In the fall, I would get emails here and there mentioning an upcoming presentation, or a shipment of supplies. Immediately after the earthquake a few weeks ago, I was overwhelmed by the barrage of emails coming through the list everyday saying: “I’m an ER surgeon in North Carolina ready to volunteer immediately – when can I leave? We’re a team of four nurses and two P.As – how can we help? I’m a French, English, and Kreyol speaking Haitian ready to go to Port au Prince – does anyone need a translator?”

Confronted not with burning coals and soaring angels in a temple, but with an earthquake, these people are literally exclaiming, “Here I am. Send me.” Offering their own gifts and the training they have acquired, some of them, like the disciples, have left everything to respond to a pressing and challenging call. I find myself wondering if I would be willing to respond to God’s call with the same eagerness, speed, and faith.

Now, what about all of us? Here we are, a large congregation, each of us with a calling. Perhaps some of us have realized how God is calling us, and a few have answered. Many may be waiting, listening, praying. Looking around for some hint that God does have a plan and that you have a role in it. I’d like to hope that if I found myself in a temple filled with smoke, angels, and the train of God’s robe, I would listen up. But in the presence of a somewhat more subtle call, would we rationalize our way out of it? I’m not sure I’m suited for that line of work – Frankly, my talents lie elsewhere – I’m fine where I am, thanks though.

How easily our own interests and desires could muddle our understanding of God’s call. How easily we can settle into complacency and stop listening. Or, we could just keep listening, trying to be sure and not presumptuous and therefore never taking action.

In addition to the enormous, life-altering calls heard by people like Isaiah and the disciples, doesn't God call us to discipleship each day? We needn't transition to a new job to respond to a call. Whether researching, building, planting, advising businesses, raising children, we are called to, with humility, acknowledge our own sin and declare our willingness to follow. That daily call isn't simple. It is a call to, like Isaiah, speak truth even when it is difficult. It is a call to take our normal, ordinary, every day lives and let them be transformed into a ministry – just as the disciples transformed their vocation as fishermen into fishers of men.

If we asked to be called, if we answer the call, where will God lead us? God's people, according to scripture, are called "from labor to rest", "from death to life", "from darkness to light", "from bondage to liberty and peace." We won't all be Bonhoeffers, won't all leave everything to immerse ourselves in disaster relief, but each of us can listen for and respond to an equally significant call closer to home. I don't mean to present a watered down version of the former spectacular callings, but an equally transformational, thought somewhat more subtle, call.

Knowing that God calls us to challenging tasks which we might not consider ourselves worthy of or prepared for, answering such a call is intimidating. Whether it's a call to move across the world and take on a new challenge or move across the office and minister to a neighbor, we might feel in over our heads. But the examples of Isaiah and Peter tell us otherwise, and Scripture offers us a few things to expect.

First, that God's call may not make sense to us. He finds people who aren't confident or extremely capable, and calls them to greatness. By choosing ordinary people, who could never accomplish such tasks without God, his power is made perfect in weakness. Second, God's call isn't easy. It's a call to take up our cross and follow Christ. Whether our whole world is transformed, or just our daily purpose, it is a call to leave everything and, supported by grace, fix our eyes on the Almighty God. And a call to, like Job, maintain faith in God throughout. Finally, God's call is to be answered with discipleship. Whether a life changing event or a daily call to minister and serve, we are to get up and follow Christ saying, "Here I am. Send me." Amen.