

## *Words Given and Spoken*

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,  
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*Preached on the Trinity Sunday, (7June), 2009.*

Text: “Here I am, send me.” ~Isaiah 6:8c.

Our reading is the awe-filled story of the call of Isaiah in the Temple. The words Isaiah heard from the seraph remind us of the Nicene hymn, “*Holy, Holy, Holy.*” It is an inspiring hymn to sing, but in the Temple that day there must have been more fear than awe for Isaiah. The darkened room filled with smoke, the presence of angelic beings hovering around, the voices, the fire from the altar. It is a great story and I never miss an opportunity to preach on a call story. The idea that God picks certain persons for particular missions is a central tenet of our faith. While it is probable that none of us will receive a call on the level of Isaiah’s, who knows, perhaps one of you will hear another call today—or maybe I will! God knows and has purposes for people. Have you ever heard a call?

The number of people who have a direct encounter like Isaiah’s with the Lord God is rare in human history and rare even in scripture. Most calls are indirect. Another direct encounter with the Lord is Moses’ in Exodus 33 and 34. Though it was not the call of Moses in the burning bush,<sup>1</sup> it nonetheless bears similarities to what Isaiah heard and saw in the Temple during the day he heard God’s call. God placed Moses behind a rock to protect him from the force of the divine presence. (Think about that statement for a moment!) It, too, is a stirring story. As the Lord passed before Moses cowering behind the rock, his attributes were chanted over and over:

The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and fourth generation.<sup>2</sup>

There was the assurance of God’s goodness, faithfulness and love, but there was also—as we see in Isaiah as well—the issue of guilt, forgiveness and judgment. When God’s presence enveloped him Isaiah cried, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips.”<sup>3</sup> There is a common theme here between God’s encounters with Moses and Isaiah. In the presence of God a person not only learns about God—who is identified by love, faithfulness, and mercy—but also becomes aware of his or her mistakes. In the prophet’s case, his frailties were noted in an odd image: *unclean lips*. Is it because Isaiah was called to speak God’s word? The guilt of Isaiah and his generation is expressed in categories of lying, purposeful misunderstanding, and

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 3.

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 34:6-7.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 6:5.

failure to comprehend the word of God and act upon it. Isaiah was called to speak for God, and part of the irony of his call was that God told him people would not understand him. They would hear but not understand.<sup>4</sup> What a burden for a prophet!

From both Isaiah and other prophets we know the first step for prophecy is to understand honestly the human situation. Prophecy is not so much about foretelling the future. The message is about the present situation. Prophets are never popular people in their times. Yet, coming to awareness of guiltiness is only preliminary; the prophet also experiences the mercy of God. The seraph told Isaiah, “your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.”<sup>5</sup> This is not the same as “*I’m okay; you’re okay.*” “Your sin is blotted out.”

The final step in prophecy is always inherently positive, for the prophet understands the plan of God and the place God wants to take humanity. He or she communicates that plan and attempts to motivate people to change their various directions and take God’s single path. This presumes the prophet believes the human situation is redeemable. Thus, though first negative in his or her contemporary assessment, the prophet is always a messenger who hopes.

Years ago one of our members complained to me about our weekly use of the confession of sin in worship. The fellow wondered if we weren’t being too negative. “Shouldn’t people leave church feeling more affirmed,” he proffered, “not filled with pessimism?” One the confessions I had picked for that day must have seemed a little too harsh in its condemnation of our sins. I smiled but held my ground. “No,” I replied. If we are genuinely to offer something different from the popular feel-goods, we must recognize the historic, genuine and verifiable human challenges: for us as individuals as well as our society. Christianity is more than a smiley face sticker on the church sign out front.

There is more hope in the Christian message than all the popular prognostication that is more palatable to listen to. If the messenger truly has come into contact with the Creator and mercy, the messenger knows the obstacles—sin and such—but also the truth of God, the plan of God, the path of God. The prophet knows even while being realistic about human frailty, that a better way is possible. The Gospel prescribed for today is John 3, the story about Nicodemus’ coming to Jesus at night. Jesus told the thoughtful man about the possibilities of new starts. If at first you get the path wrong, God allows you to stop and start over again. Of our mistakes, sins and false starts, Jesus told Nicodemus: “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”<sup>6</sup>

Isn’t that something? God may be speaking to you right now, calling you through the teaching of Scripture or the words of a hymn to a new task. “Oh, not me,” you may say. “I’ve never been good at things like this and besides I’m not perfect, not good

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<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 8:9-10.

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 6:7.

<sup>6</sup> John 3:17.

enough, not the right person. I've often gotten off on the wrong start, said the wrong things. Me?"

Look at the legitimate excuses of Isaiah and Nicodemus. Isaiah wanted a pass because he was a man of unclean lips. The angel took a burning coal from the altar fire and touched the penitent's lips. "Now your mouth will work. I'll give you the words. Don't worry about the reaction, even if people don't get it. My words," God said, "are essential. My word must be let loose." And Nicodemus: "How can a man be born again when he is old?"<sup>7</sup> Or, perhaps better, "How can I change direction so radically at my age?" A few of you may be thinking just that.

But when God calls, all the excuses in the world will not stop the word that must be spoken by this God of second chances. "Thy will be done," we pray every day, "on earth as it is in heaven." What if you or that person next to you is the agent through which God will work part of the divine will?

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said, "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here I am; send me!"<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John 3:4.

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 6:6-8.