

Who's Calling?

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
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Text: Isaiah 64:3-5

“There was a time when you came and did terrifying things that we did not expect; the mountains saw you and shook with fear. No one has even seen or heard of a God like you, who does such deeds for those who put their hope in him. You welcome those who find joy in doing what is right, those who remember how you want them to live.”

It was a time of loss and deprivation when the prophet Isaiah uttered this oracle. He mentioned¹ that the Temple had been destroyed. There was not even a place for them to go to pray. Where could they turn? You have to imagine the devastation of a military occupation, the disruption of agriculture, widespread hunger and the large numbers of refugees. It was exactly the time to call upon God but the infrastructure upon which the faith relied was nonexistent. The prophet in his message laid out the classic pattern of *renewal-decline-remember-return-renewal*. His words describe, particularly if you look at chapter 63, the lament, the call on God for renewal, and the resulting answer.

It was not an angel but the Lord himself who saved them. In his love and compassion he rescued them. He had always taken care of them in the past but they rebelled against him and made his holy spirit sad.

Then he remembered the ancient days, Moses and his people. Where now is the Lord who saved the leaders of his people from the sea? Where is the Lord who gave his spirit to Moses? Where is the Lord who by his power did great things through Moses?

You are our Father... our Redeemer from of old is your name....Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes of your heritage....We have become like those whom you never ruled, like those who are not called by your name.”

Why don't you tear the sky open and come down? The mountains would tremble before you—as when flames ignite brushwood and fire causes water to boil—to make your name known to your foes, and cause nations to tremble before you.”²

The people had forgotten God and now were in trouble. They remembered their connection with God in older days and recognized that the underlying problems of their situation were spiritual. Turning from their mistakes and seeking God—the literal translation is seeking ‘the face of God’—triggered a new dynamic that saved them from the enemy. In their dismal

¹ Isaiah 63:18 and 64:11.

² Isaiah 63:9-64:1, selections.

circumstance, the prophet's prayer is not for not another messenger but for the direct intervention by God himself.³

It has always been frustrating to be a believer in a time of decline. We know the cycle: God saves us, we fall and forget, then we remember God in a new generation and call out to God to save us again. Isaiah's time was a time of decline. The prophet lamented, "there is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; you have hidden your face from us."⁴ But Isaiah remembered. He remembered the faithfulness of God to Moses and called out to God. As God always does, these pleas were answered and a new cycle of renewal began.

Early in the First Century a similar situation existed. The Temple stood, but Israel was now a province of the Roman Empire, controlled by foreigners. We should see John the Baptist and Jesus in this light. Like Isaiah 500 years before, both John and Jesus saw that the Jewish people had forgotten God and must be called to repent and draw near to God again. John's fulminations, though we focus on his condemnation of sin, should be seen and interpreted as a new call for the direct intervention of God. "O that you would rend the heavens and come down!" Though we see Jesus' movement as a completely new religion, to those in the first century it was a renewal movement within Judaism. It was only because of the later antipathy between Hebrews who believed Jesus was the Messiah and those who did not that we set out on different trajectories.

Increasingly, I suspect we are in another time similar to Isaiah's and John's. This weekend there are hints of our problems. That stunning story of the woman who pepper sprayed other shoppers at a WalMart in California so she could purchase an X-Box for a Christmas (!) gift. But that is only the tip of the iceberg. We have forgotten the purpose of things. We are adrift from the spiritual moorings that used to direct us. Even more embarrassingly, is our congregation wandering aimlessly? In one sense, our culture knows it is in trouble. Diagnosis, or as we usually experience it, *whining about our situation*, is not the problem. But what to do about the decline, that is the question. Many in our denomination know we are weakened. Underlying our circumstance is that we are profoundly out of touch spiritually with God. The solution is as in Isaiah's time and in the First Century. We need to be called to remember. Remember two things: first, what God did in past times for and with the people who believed and second, remember God is the potter, we are the clay. We must be willing to be shaped by God not by the spirit of the age. This requires turning away from many choices that world thinks right. The word John the Baptist used for it is repentance. Turn around; follow God. The next step: We must call upon God for help. Stunningly God has been calling us all along. Listen to these words from God:

I have made myself available to those who have not even bothered to ask. I am here, ready to be found by those who have not even bothered to look. I kept saying, "I'm here, I'm right here" to a nation that ignored me. I reached out day after day to a people who

³ Childs, Brevard. *Isaiah*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 523. Commenting on Isaiah 63:9 and 64:1 and 7.

⁴ Isaiah 64:7.

turned their backs on me, people who make wrong turns, who insist on doing things their own way.⁵

God calls; those who remember call. What and when will there be a connection? God is available to those who didn't even know they needed God.

Increasingly some among us are getting it. First we understand that that something is wrong with the way we are heading and that our problem is profoundly spiritual. Second, we hear the calling is a message from God. If the phone is ringing, pick it up and answer. It is time to take God's call and do something about the predicament we are in. What should we say? How about this, "Why don't you tear the sky open and come down?"

Here is some more of Isaiah: "So [God] became their Savior. In all their troubles, [God] was troubled, too. [God] didn't send someone else to help them. God did it... in person. Out of [God's] own love and pity, [God] redeemed them."⁶ Sound like what we need? Yes! And so with Isaiah and with John the Baptist, I call out to us, to each of you. This is my voice, but in it hear God's calling, too:

Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low,
And the crooked shall be made straight,
And the rough way shall be made smooth;
And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.⁷

Don't just complain about all that is wrong in our time. Recognize that this is at its root a profoundly spiritual problem. Accept God's call. Remember what God has done before to save. Realize and believe what God can do today to save us. Ready yourself, your family, your church. Clear the Lord's path of obstacles, many of which we have put in place ourselves. The Lord is the potter; we are the clay. Let God shape you and make us a people. Christ is coming, and *God knows*, we need him.

End

Whos Calling.DOC.

⁵ Isaiah 65:1-2. *The Message* translation.

⁶ Isaiah 63:8-9. *The Message* translation.

⁷ Luke 3:4-6, quoting Isaiah 40:3-5.