

Called to Stand: A Sermon preached by Rev Doug Mork at Cross of Glory Lutheran Church in Brooklyn Center on November 13, 2016

"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!" (Isaiah 6: 8b)

This is quite a vision that Isaiah has, in the year King Uzziah died. The Lord on his throne, angels in attendance, the pivots on the threshold shaking and the house of the Lord filled with smoke. Isaiah is terrified, and I don't just mean in the vision. Maybe you haven't had such a vision---or nightmare---and struggle to relate to Isaiah's call story. But he didn't need the vision to be afraid. I suspect the vision is just an illustration of what's going on inside his head and heart.

Isaiah's world is a mess. The Assyrians are at the gates, the largest, most advanced military power the world has ever known, threatening to march on Jerusalem, a city with few defenses in comparison. And if all that wasn't bad enough, Isaiah has discerned a call. A call by the Almighty God. A call that's going to send him from his little life at the edge of things into the middle of all this. And it's not even a call to fight. Surely even that would be better than this. He's supposed to speak for God. To his own people---all of them, kings and so called prophets, commoners, even his own family.

Worse yet he's supposed to tell them that if the Assyrians are threatening it's because Israel's got it coming. They have not done justice, they have not cared for the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger. They've enjoyed their comfortable houses with little regard for their neighbor.

Isaiah does not feel qualified. He's not pure enough, holy enough to speak and act for God! Along with the basic fear of the consequences of this mission to which he has been called, Isaiah feels deeply unworthy. How can he call people to repent, to turn back to God, when he often hasn't done the right thing himself? Won't people think he's just a hypocrite?

Isaiah has to come to terms with who he is and who God is in order to answer this call, to serve God boldly, to enter the fray. He needs to accept that God isn't looking for a saint, just a servant, and that with him he will do great things. In fact, long after the words of Israel's and Assyria's kings are mostly forgotten, millions will still read the words and stories about God's call to and work through this 8th Century BC prophet.

On Friday we celebrated Veteran's Day, a day set aside to honor those who have answered another call, to serve in the military. For some who served, some of you in this sanctuary now and among those you know and love, this story of Isaiah may have seemed a bit familiar---or it should have. Perhaps you didn't have a grand vision of God on the throne, of angels or smoke or earthquakes or hot coals, but nonetheless you heard God's call to step away from all the things you had been planning, from the life you were pursuing, from your dreams and loves and hopes for the future, and embark on an uncertain path. Perhaps you wondered if you were up to it,

perhaps you just responded to the call with the sense that it mattered, that the world might be a different place if you didn't.

For all who were people of faith and heard this call to serve as at least partly a call from God, this call was not unlike Isaiah's in our story. Their freedom to do anything they wanted, to freely live their own life was now being subsumed into something larger, into work on behalf of a larger mission. This, of course, did not guarantee success or survival or even that it was God's call to begin with---like Isaiah we're saint and sinner, capable of wondrous things with God's help but also deeply broken.

As Christians on Veterans Day we honor the service of these veterans, we thank them for answering the call, we hope to learn from their courage to listen for our own calls to all the places God may call us.

So, where is God calling you? Where is God calling us, the church at this moment in our life together? The juxtaposition of our text, the election and Veteran's Day this week has had me thinking about calls. I think we've been pretty good, at least sometimes, at recognizing and honoring certain kinds of calls, especially the dramatic ones or the ones that seem to kind of pull us out of normal, everyday life.

We've honored the call to military service in the midst of war or threat, the call of those dramatic figures we could name who've seemed larger than life and taken on some great challenge, the call to someone in a youth group or congregation to run off on a mission trip for a week or a month and help some in desperate need. These things we recognize and might even see them akin to some of these calls we find throughout our biblical stories.

Unfortunately where we often fail to take God's call seriously is in the rest of life, with the ordinary day to day of job and family and community. The church we've constructed in the 20th century has tended to function as a service club. We worship on Sundays, we help with a committee or project, we do a little studying and reading together, we take good care of our building---and then the rest of the time we live our "normal" lives of work, play, family, etc.

Oh sure we ask a confirmation kid or two about what they may feel God is calling them to do. But we don't really mean it, at least not for long. We mostly assume young people will find a job that suits their interest and pays the bills, we want them to be happy, and we hope and dream that they'll find a little place for church on the side. If we expect anyone to have a call akin to Isaiah's, it's pastors or professors, public or church leaders or the like. It's no wonder people are leaving the church in droves. People aren't looking for a nice clubhouse anymore.

What they are looking for, young and old alike I think, is a call, a sense of purpose, of being a part of something bigger than just paying bills and golf. We have too often failed in the church to suggest the Isaiah's call story is just a prototype, an example of the way in which God calls us

from the paths and choices we made into something else, something beyond helping with the youth group or going on the summer mission trip.

What if we suggested that we believed that God was calling all of us, “drafting” all of us if you will, to live lives of great meaning and purpose? What if we said the minute you are washed in the waters of baptism you are no longer free to do whatever you want? That might make some baptismal candidates or their parents a bit nervous. What if instead of imagining that what we needed to learn was a set of bible stories, creeds and theological formulas, the church was instead training its young and old people alike to discern God’s call in everyday life? I believe the present moment, perhaps as much as any other in history, calls us to speak in new ways about what it means to be the church and what it means to follow Jesus.

Regardless of whether you think government is a powerful tool or a necessary evil, regardless of whether you think taxes are the best or the worst way to organize our money to accomplish things, regardless of whether you think regulations are the only way to protect people or that the free market will bring prosperity, these are all things upon which Christians of good conscience can disagree. And, if we have any wisdom at all, we understand at least in our best moments that our best ideas are probably flawed.

However, this week we have elected a President who both from his own mouth and through his staff and surrogates has had much to say that is in stark contrast with Christian values. His speeches, tweets and rants have been full of hate and fear-mongering. His words about and to women are deeply disgraceful, giving the nod of acceptance to behavior that should be left in a dark past. His anti-immigrant messages have left our brothers and sisters, my neighbors and yours, wondering if they are safe. His assault on people of other faiths, especially Muslims, is deeply disrespectful and arrogant. His attacks on GLBTQ people have left many in my family and yours fearful and threaten to return us to a day when families threw out their children who didn’t fit the mold they had constructed for them.

Of course we’ll have to wait and see how President Trump behaves once he’s in office. He’s our President, we’ll pray for him. But as Christians we cannot wait to respond to all the ways his campaign has already taken a different path than our faith calls us. I am hopeful by nature, and God is faithful, but I believe we find ourselves in a very dark moment in America. The call on the faith community, both individually and collectively, to stand against his words and the values behind them seems clear. There is a deep alienation and distrust across this country that has brought us to this place. It’s time we get far more serious about listening for the ways God may be calling us to stand, speak and work for an America that reflects our faith values. We cannot continue on present paths. While this vote certainly reflects a deep desire for new directions, hate and fear, misogyny and racism have no place in our faith, our church or our country.

May we all show the courage that so many have before to answer the calls that God may put upon us. AMEN