

Responding

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Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Isaiah 6.1-8 (NRSV)

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: “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!”

Then one of the seraphs 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 am I; send me!”

Introduction

I may have asked this question before but it is apropos this text from Isaiah. How is it that you woke up this morning? It would be fun to go around the sanctuary and ask everyone what awakened them today. Were we to do that I suspect we would hear a variety of answers. Many would answer that the alarm clock woke them up or the lightsome dawn streaming in the window. Some might answer that a family member awakened them or a pet scratching at the door or birds singing outside an open window. Others might say that a bad dream woke them up or too much to eat or drink last night. A few might answer that they never got to sleep at all last night and one or two might chuckle that they are not yet awake!

I’m guessing, however, that no one would say that God woke them up. We tend not to talk like that. Had I asked the question, what awakened the world this morning or who caused the sun to rise, then you would have guessed what I was getting at. Many would answer that while the laws of physics govern planets and suns, God creates those laws and works in them. Therefore, God awakened the sun this morning. We understand that in the natural world but not always in the human world.

I suggest to you that just as God works in the laws of physics, God is at work in the human body and the human heart and everything that happens to us and within us is a response to God’s call. What awakened you and me this morning? God’s call. That’s the theological answer and while most of us do not talk in that language, it is the reality of all that happens. God calls and the universe, the world, and we respond.

The text I read from Isaiah is one of dozens of “calling texts” in the Bible. It comes from Isaiah’s grand vision of a holy and awesome God. God’s power and majesty so fill the temple that Isaiah fears he will be undone, crushed literally by the weighty glory of God. But God’s presence didn’t crush Isaiah but cleansed and called him. Isaiah had enough sense in the end and enough faith

to respond: “Here am I; send me!” So for a few minutes this morning I want to talk about our responding in faith to God’s call.

God calls, we respond

It may not occur to you but worship is all about responding to God’s call. Just as Isaiah’s vision of God took place in the temple, that is, in the context of worship, so our worship is one of the best ways we respond to God’s call. Responding to God affects even our pattern of worship, even though we don’t always pay much attention to that pattern.

In Presbyterian worship there are four major sections in the liturgy and these are more or less present in all of our worship services. First, there is “Gathering.” Just as we all awakened today, theologically speaking because of God, so we gather as God’s people in response to God’s call.

The second section of worship is “The Word.” Why do we gather? We gather to listen. To listen to God’s Word — God’s Word written, God’s Word proclaimed, God’s Word enacted.

The third section of worship is “The Eucharist” referring to the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Most Presbyterian churches don’t celebrate Eucharist every Sunday. Our normal time is the first Sunday of each month. But the word *eucharist* means *thanksgiving* and is that not our proper response to God’s Word? We hear God speak and we give thanks. And in Eucharist, even our giving thanks is a response to God calling us into fellowship as a people who belong to Christ and to each other. No where is that better expressed than around the communion table. We don’t have the Lord’s Supper in every worship service but in a deep sense we always have eucharist — we always give thanks.

Finally, the last section of worship is “Sending.” We respond by gathering. We respond by listening. We respond by giving thanks. We respond, finally, by going. The call of God always asks, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And we respond, “Here am I; send me!” God calls and we gather, we listen, we give thanks, and we are sent.

In today’s service we also have the blessing of celebrating the sacrament of baptism. Baptism is both God’s call and a response to God’s call. Also today we are welcoming seven new members, seven young women and men who have completed the confirmation class. Confirmation is the fulfillment of what is promised in baptism. Our confirmands are now witnessing publicly to the faith witnessed to by their parents when they were baptized. Everything happening today, in one way or another, is responding to God’s call.¹

However, there are different ways of responding to God’s call and we should notice that not

¹ Douglas John Hall, *Confessing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) 151. “The... conception of Christian mission presupposes a *divine* mission as the foundation without which the mission of the disciple community would be literally impossible. The Christ-event (to use that particular nomenclature) both effects and reveals the ‘new reality’ assumed by Christian evangelical work in the world. ‘The most wonderful thing has happened’ (Buttrick) — to speak eschatologically, it has happened, is happening, and shall happen. Quite independently of *our* will and *our* witness, God is active in the world, effecting the change that was introduced into history through Jesus Christ and that will in God’s own time and manner be brought to completion.

This divine mission is not only prior to and definitive for the Christian mission, it is also infinitely more expansive. What Christians may see of it at any moment in time is only at best a fraction of its magnitude, the tip of the iceberg. In fact, deeply to sense *God’s* mission in the world is to experience both awe and humility: awe at glimpsing something of the magnificence of that in which one is oneself involved; humility born of the recognition that one’s own participation is infinitesimal and, quite possibly, so parochial as to be practically insignificant.”

everyone responds in the same way.

- There are those awakened by God today only to head to the mall or the lake or whatever, with nary a thought about God who makes all of that possible. Is there anything wrong with the mall or the lake or whatever? Maybe not, but it's very easy to substitute things for God and ultimately that is idolatry.
- There are those awakened by God today only to plan some evil, to bring into the light a hideous creation of darkness, a plan to hurt, hate, or hinder instead of a desire to bless, help, and heal. Such responses blatantly disobey God's call.
- There are those awakened by God today only to gather to themselves. I still see a bumper sticker fairly often which says, "It's All About Me." I wonder to myself, *who would make that a banner of one's life and display it for the world to see?* Maybe it is a joke. But not a very funny joke. For God calls us to bless us that we might bless others. It's *not* all about ourselves.

People do respond differently to the call of God. Some responses are better than others though no response makes us morally or spiritually superior. So do not look down on the neighbor who was heading for the mall as you were heading for church. Just be thankful that you are lucky enough — to put it in worldly terms — or graced enough — to put it in theological terms — to respond in faith to God's call. And love your neighbors enough so that they too might learn to respond more faithfully.

Conclusion

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells a story about a man who died after having led a completely immoral and selfish life. Moments later he found himself in a world of bright sunlight, soft music, and people dressed all in white.

"Boy, I never expected this," he said to himself. "I guess God has a soft spot in his heart for a clever rascal like me."

He turned to a figure in a white robe and said, "Buddy, I've got something to celebrate. Can I buy you a drink?"

The figure answered, "If you mean alcoholic beverages, we don't have any of those around here."

"No booze, huh? Well, then, what about a game of cards? Pinochle, draw poker, you name it."

"I'm sorry, but we don't gamble here either," was the answer.

"Well, what do you do all day?" the man asked.

The person in the white robe answered, "We read the psalms a lot. There is a Bible class every morning, and a prayer circle in the afternoon."

"Psalms! Bible study all day long! Boy, I'll tell you — heaven isn't what it's cracked up to be."

Then the figure in white smiled and said, "I see that you do not understand. We're in heaven. You're in hell."²

The point here is not to make a self-righteous condemnation of alcohol or playing cards or

² Harold S. Kushner, *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) 156-157.

anything else. The point is that, just as Isaiah experienced, heaven is the presence of a holy God and if we are not making ourselves holy by responding rightly to God's call, then being in God's presence may be the worst kind of hell.

My friend, God awakened you this morning and God brought you here. God calls to you, in ways big and small. And in Christ's name I invite you always to respond in faith: "Here am I, Lord. Send me."