

IS THAT GOD CALLING?
Isaiah 6:1-8, John 3:1-17
Bicentennial Year Celebration

Teaching as been in my blood all my life. After teaching in the public school, we came here to Batavia to being another type of teaching—the Word of God. Now, I teach at our local community college, in the Humanities Department. One course that I teach on a regular basis is Contemporary Ethics. For some strange reason, this course has an uncanny way of being relevant. Imagine! One has only to read the morning paper or watch TV newscasts, and we discover a plethora of ethical/moral situations being played out.

The first part of the course is examining what we call ethical theories, those concepts by which people make ethical choices—and we all must make choices every day of our lives. Those include diving command, relativism, egoism, utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, natural law/natural rights, and virtue ethics. No, this is not an introductory discourse of subject, though you would find the study challenging. Several years ago, Sheila took my course. She scored about 110% of the possible points—without any assistance from me. And none of the students knew of our relationship.

Not surprising, many students rely on divine command as their main center of focus—that concept that whatever God commands as being good or bad. Does God speak in an audible voice with His commands? That's possible. One weakness of this premise is that everything, then, can be blamed on God. Where does personal responsibility and accountability come into play?

I tell this story that most people find incredible. While pasturing in Indiana, the church secretary prayed for me that I would receive the Holy Spirit because I didn't speak in tongues. I gently reminded her that God gave me other gifts. Martha was, indeed, a very spiritual person. I don't deny that. But she and her husband needed to buy a new car. So they went to God in prayer as to which car to buy. She claimed that God told them to read from the Acts. I believe it was the fourth chapter. In her version, Luke's words were translated, "And the Apostles were all of one accord." Guess what car they bought? A Honda Accord. What would have happened, I ask my students, if the car had turned out to be a lemon? "God told us to do that," would probably been the response.

Have you ever heard the voice of God? From earliest biblical times, people have given God anthropomorphic attributes, human-like qualities. God walks in the Garden and speaks to Adam and Eve. God becomes angry, even wrathful. The Bible so often uses the masculine in referring to God. The writers certainly were not saying that God is an old man with a flowing white beard, as Michelangelo depicted in the Sistine Chapel.

Certainly. God can speak in an audible voice. However, someone can wait a lifetime to have that happen. The point is this: no one can dictate how God will deal with us. Of course, the Bible has many instance when God, indeed, spoke. When we encounter these instances, especially in the Old Testament, God seemed to speak during a mystical experience.

Such is the case with Isaiah. We find God's call to Isaiah to be the prophet who would speak God's word to a wayward people. In this sixth chapter, we have some of the most memorable words of perhaps the greatest of all the prophets. No, prophets were not fortune-tellers or seers. They were preachers who spoke for God. Without exception, every prophet was never

appreciated in his time. In fact, only in retrospect did people realize that what they were saying was, indeed, the word of God because many of the warnings were legitimate.

Exactly who was Isaiah? Here's a brief synopsis of his life. He was the son of Amoz and prophesied during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. Tradition has it that Isaiah was martyred during the reign of Menassah, one of the most corrupt of all kings.

The Book of Isaiah is usually divided into two parts—chapters 1-39, during the time before the exile, and chapter 40 on, often referred to as Second Isaiah, emphasizing the hope of restoration and the work of the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Christ, for Χριστός is the Greek word for "Messiah."

With that information in mind, we come to the memorable sixth chapter and Isaiah's actual call to ministry. These are some of the most memorable words of all prophecy. Isaiah encountered the Almighty in this "other-worldly" scene, replete with smoke, the Lord sitting on His throne, angels, fire. We can't possibly comprehend the awe and the fright that the prophet experienced.

Putting that aside, what is vital in all of this is that Isaiah was being called to be the preacher, to embark on a career of proclaiming God's word to a wayward people. These words ring loud and clear—"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Without hesitation, Isaiah replied, "Here am I. Send me!"

The call of God! Who could resist? Keep in mind that no prophet was accepted in his own time. Just as Jesus said that a prophet is without merit in his own country, so Isaiah was about to embark on a life-long journey of faithfulness to his calling. Little did the prophet realize at that time what he would endure in his calling to obey God.

Are you called by God? What is your vocation, your calling? John Calvin was a revolutionary in his own right. He was the first theologian to elevate all endeavors to be a vocation, a calling. You see, you don't have to be a theologian, a pastor, a missionary—any church-related calling—to be called by God.

When I look at my own calling, I was first a public school teacher. That is a calling, one of the highest callings of all. I'm just glad that I don't have to put up with what teachers have to endure these days. 'Way back then, the teacher had authority in the classroom. Now, many students don't fear anyone.

When was I called to be a minister? It all started back in the Dark Ages when I was in junior high school. I thought and talked about being a minister because I always felt close to God. That faded away as I went to college to become a teacher. Even back then, I soon realized that students were having to face problems and have questions about things in life that I couldn't deal with.

Then, Sheila came into my life. I've always considered her to be my spiritual mentor. As we shared some of our visions for life, she made me realize that I should listen to God's voice, calling me. I remember one experience that more or less galvanized my call. Our very best friends in Butler lost their 18-year-old son in a terrible accident. Bob had planned on going into the ministry. At the funeral back in 1963, the pastor shared Bob's vision of becoming a minister, perhaps a missionary. How well I remember those words that day: "Who will go for Bob? Who will try to fulfill this young man's vision of faithful service?" I thought to myself and later shared with Sheila—"Here am I. Send me."

Time does not permit me to detail so many confirmations of my call. Yes, there was a challenge. Just weeks before entering seminary, I received a call from the Abington Township School District near Philadelphia, then paying the highest salaries of any PA school district. My student teaching supervisor went from Clymer, PA to Abington and recommended me for a position teaching English. I paused for perhaps a nanosecond before telling the person who called that I was committed for my future.

My pledge to God on July 2, 1967 was that I would go wherever God wanted me to go and to stay as long as He wanted me to stay. That meant, of course, that I may be sent where I didn't want to go and to leave before I thought my work was done. Of course, that goes for Sheila as well. We still say that there are skid marks on the interstate when we moved from Monticello, Indiana to Graham, North Carolina. Sheila was dragging her feet. Well, maybe that's a bit of an exaggeration.

Did God speak to me in an audible voice? No. However, God works in mysterious ways. Our call was confirmed time and time again. Here in Batavia, we knew immediately that our mission was here. People touched our lives in ways that we will never forget. Dear Emily McBride was a true saint and helped both of us focus in on our purpose of being here. Youth Club would never have been so successful without Emily's artistic ability and the devotion of so many other people.

Our ultimate goal is and has been to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. We do this with our words, our actions, our example of living. Jesus knew His calling to bring people back to God. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son so that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life. God didn't send His Son to condemn the world but that the world through Him might be saved." You see, if God so loved us and gave His Son for us, should not we heed the call of our Lord to bring others to Him?

How do we do this? First, Christians must listen for the voice of God. Was there an audible voice? Probably not! Was there some dramatic natural phenomenon? Probably not! Christians have had to listen to the still small voice of calm. This congregation has been fulfilling that very mission for 200 years. Was everything smooth sailing along the way? Obviously, not! However, with such a cloud of witnesses throughout the ages listening for that still small voice of calm, you have had a fruitful ministry. And, with God's help, may you have at least 200 more years of ministry in Batavia, NY.

Please join me in responding to God's call to continue serving as faithful ministry in this community and in the world. If you so choose, please repeat with me, "Here am I. Send me."
"Here am I. Send me."
Amen

Sheila and I are pleased and honored to be here this morning. First Presbyterian Church of Batavia, NY was where we began our journey of faithful service. We have so many good memories. We came with one child and left with three. We adopted Eric in 1969 and Erin in 1971. How well we remember Erin's coming into our life. We received her the day of the horrible Attica Prison riot. One thing I remember about Eric's baptism was a lesson learned. Custodian Carl McCoy ALWAYS saw that EVERY detail for the service was in order. Then I started Eric's baptism. When I came to the point at which I put my hand in the water in the baptismal bowl, there was no water. We went through with a "dry run" and completed the

baptism after the service with several elders and friends—and water in the bowl. After that, I followed up with Carl's preparation.

Some people that we remember so well. We had a next door neighbor, Helen, who was a wonderful neighbor, but she didn't miss a thing. You see, I always went down to check on our garden each morning with my cup of coffee. One day Helen asked Sheila what I was doing every morning with that cup. Without missing a beat, she said that I was sprinkling holy water on the garden. Her response was simply, "Oh."

And then there was the time that I was celebrating a birthday which I was not going to mention. Before the service started, Ann Emmans got up and announced my birthday with these words, "He's not as old as he looks." Oh, she turned red! Ann, that was one of the funniest things. You are by far the most gifted musician I ever had the privilege to work with.

Speaking of funny...the verses from Psalm 66 were not in today's lectionary reading. You see, I did something very funny but didn't know that I was being funny. I believe that Sunday was in August 1967. We were having some sort of commemorative service, and the sanctuary was full. I gave the call to worship and noticed that everyone was smiling. I thought to myself, "This is going to be a great day." Not until after the service was over did I realize why everyone was in such a good mood. In the call to worship, I said, "Let us make a noyful joise to the Lord." Sheila still talks about the Zorn family chuckling throughout the entire service, even rocking the pew a bit. I, too, laughed after the service. What else could I do?

We took several Senior High mission trips in the five years we were here. The most memorable was our trip to Chinle, Arizona, on the Navajo Reservation. We had a bus load of 34. We traveled four days each direction and worked eight days at the Mission—that's 16 days of being responsible for that many people 24 hours a day. And Sheila was responsible for all of the cooking and nursing duties. When we arrived back here in the church parking lot, someone had the nerve to ask us how we enjoyed our vacation. That was no vacation, but it was a once-in-a-lifetime experience.