

# Call to Ministry

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Isaiah 6:1-8

**Sermon Series:**  
**Calling People to Faith**

***“St. Anne,  
help me, I will  
become a  
monk.”***

- Martin Luther

One day, Martin Luther was walking to a village when the sky suddenly became overcast. He was caught in a severe thunderstorm. A bolt of lightning crashed so close to Luther that he was thrown to the ground. Struggling to rise, he cried out, “St. Anne, help me, I will become a monk.”

Luther made good on his vow. He quit his law studies and entered the monastery, much to the dismay of his father, Hans. Luther quickly distinguished himself as a budding theologian and promising priest. Following his ordination, Luther made his public debut as a cleric by celebrating his first mass. His father had made peace with his son’s decision to give up a lucrative career in law for the priesthood. He began to speak about his son with a sense of pride, “My son, the priest.”

Luther began worship with great poise, exuding a priestly bearing of confidence and self-control. When he came to the Prayer of Consecration—that moment in the mass when Luther would exercise his priestly authority for the first time to evoke the power of God to transform the elements of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, Luther faltered. He froze at the altar. A nervous hush fell upon the congregation as they silently urged

on this young priest. A wave of parental embarrassment swept over his father. Luther’s lips began to quiver as he tried to speak the words of the mass. He suddenly went limp and staggered to his seat. He had failed. He had ruined the mass, disgracing both himself and his father. Hans was furious. What was supposed to be his son’s finest hour had degenerated into public humiliation.

What happened at the altar? Looking back on it later, Luther offered an explanation. When Luther was about to say, “We offer unto thee, the living, the true, the eternal holy God,” he writes these words:

“At these words I was utterly stupefied and terror-stricken. I thought to myself, ‘With what tongue shall I address such majesty, seeing that all men ought to tremble in the presence of even an earthly prince? Who am I, that I should lift up mine eyes or raise my hands to the divine Majesty? The angels surround him. At his nod the earth trembles. And shall I, a miserable little pigmy, say, ‘I want this, I ask for that’? For I am dust and ashes and full of sin and I am speaking to the living, eternal and the true God.’”

Modern psychologists have had a field day with Luther’s sanity in this moment. Before we write off the greatest leader of the Protestant

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Reformation, let me hit the pause button. We have little awareness of the holy in our worship. Perhaps, if the seraphim were singing today, they would be addressing God not as “holy, holy, holy,” but as “nice, nice, nice.” We have lost the sense of what Rudolph Otto calls “mysterium tremendum,” the awe-filled majesty of God. When, if ever, was the last time you experienced awe in worship, the kind the old spiritual sings about: “Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.” The prevailing worship mood today is casual, easy and comfortable.

Isaiah Ben Amoz could tell us something about the holiness of God. When he enters the temple looking for solace after the death of King Uzziah, who has effectively reigned over Israel for 52 years, Isaiah experiences more than he bargains for. He encounters another king seated on the throne of the temple, high and lifted up. The hem of his robe alone fills the temple.

Angelic beings called seraphs encircle the throne. This is the only instance in the Bible where these six-winged seraphs appear. Suffice it to say, they bear little resemblance to those chubby, cupid-like angels on our Christmas cards. These seraphs are singing, “Holy, holy, holy,” giving the church its most august hymn. God is three times holy.

Whenever the Bible elevates something to the third degree, it is super important. No other attribute of God is repeated three times over. The Bible never says that

God is “love, love, love” or God is “justice, justice, justice.” Whenever something is repeated three consecutive times in the Hebrew, it is elevated to the superlative degree. If I said a stone is big, it would be a stone of considerable size. But if I said a stone is big, big, it would be a really big stone. But if I said a stone is big, big, big, I would be describing a veritable gigantic boulder. The triplicate holy signifies God is really, really, really big!

Holy is a pious-sounding word. Holy people are not often thought of as particularly attractive. When I was growing up, holy people were rather glum, serious types. They always seemed like they were mad at somebody. They never smiled or seemed to be having a good time. They not only took God seriously, they took themselves far too seriously.

This is not the Biblical understanding of holy. Holy comes from an ancient word meaning to cut or separate. Something holy is separate and different from other things. God is set apart from everything else. God is in a class all by Himself. God is absolute purity, awesome goodness and incomparable majesty.

The sight and sound of God’s holiness in the temple causes the pivots in the tabernacle to shake. Even inanimate objects have the good sense to be moved by the presence of God. The doors of the temple are not the only things quaking. Isaiah also shudders in his sandals.

***...Isaiah is called by God's holiness, equipped by God's forgiveness and sent as God's emissary.***

“Woe is me,” Isaiah cries out. Woe is an old-fashioned word. When I think of woe, I flashback to Mighty Mouse streaking across the sky to rescue his girlfriend, Pearl Pureheart, who is tied to the train tracks by Oilcan Harry. Those cartoon aficionados among us will remember her cry, “Woe is me!”

Woe is an announcement of doom. “Woe is me, I am lost.” I prefer the King James language, “I am undone.” To become undone means to come apart at the seams. In this holy moment, Isaiah unravels. When Isaiah encounters the Infinite, he becomes aware that he is finite. When he meets the Eternal, he recognizes himself to be temporal.

One of the seraphs touches Isaiah’s lips with a hot coal from the fire. Isaiah feels the holy flame cauterize his mouth. The dirt in his mouth is burned away. Isaiah is refined by holy fire. Fire not only burns, it refines. In a nanosecond, this disintegrated prophet is made whole again.

Sin doesn’t disqualify Isaiah for service in the kingdom of God. But he is not fit for service in the kingdom until his sin is atoned for. Isaiah contributes nothing to his forgiveness; God does everything. There is a decisive quality about God’s forgiveness in these verses. Isaiah’s “guilt has departed, his sin is blotted out.”

For the first time, Isaiah hears God speaking. All angelic voices are stilled. A voice booms through the temple: “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?”

Notice how Isaiah answers. He doesn’t say, “Here I am,” merely to pinpoint his location. Isaiah answers, “Here am I,” to represent his stepping forward to volunteer—I will go. Send me.

We’ve been talking this fall about God’s call in our lives. God called people like Isaiah. God still calls people. Those whom God calls, He sends. The word “send” means to set someone in motion toward a purpose or goal. One of the purposes of being called is being sent. Those who are called are sent.

I went to the drive-in bank yesterday after working on this call-send sermon. I pulled up to the drive-in teller and heard a disembodied voice bid me, “Good morning.” She instructed me to use the call and send buttons on the key pad to expedite my banking. There it was in front of me, I can’t get away from it, a red button for call and a green button for send. We are called and we are sent.

We speak about our mission in this church as Call, Equip and Send. We are a church committed to call people to faith, equip people for ministry and send them into the world to love and serve the Lord. Call, equip and send is framed for us in Isaiah 6:1-8. God calls Isaiah in verses 1-4. God equips Isaiah in verses 5-7. God sends Isaiah in verse 8. In a span of 8 verses, Isaiah is called by God’s holiness, equipped by God’s forgiveness and sent as God’s emissary.

The movie *Amazing Grace* that appeared earlier this year told the story of William Wilberforce’s

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valiant efforts to abolish the slave trade in 18th century Britain. My real take-away from this movie is that there is more slavery in the 21st century, through sex trafficking, than there was in Wilberforce's era.

Our social ills are compounding. We live in a culture flying apart at the seams. The primary indicators point to the decline of western civilization.

God is looking for more Isaiahs to answer the call. "Whom shall I send?" God asks. "Who will go for us?"

Who is willing to stand up and be counted for the work of God's healing and salvation today? Many of us are rationalizing, "Hey, somebody else will do it."

What would have happened if God had asked, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" and Isaiah had responded, "O Lord, please send someone else to do it!"

Who will teach our children? Here am I, Lord. Send someone else.

Who will guide our youth? Here am I, Lord. Send someone else.

Who will invest time and money so our mission of this church can go forward? Here am I, Lord. Someone else will do it.

Who will lead our church? Here am I, Lord. Send someone else.

Jesus said to his followers, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21).

Whom shall I send? Who will go for us? Here am I, Lord. Send me! Send us!

I am indebted to R.C. Sproul's book *The Holiness of God* in preparation for this sermon.

