

“Here I Am, Lord”
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Isaiah 6:1-8

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. ² 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. ³ And one called to another and said:

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

⁴ The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵ 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!”

⁶ Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷ 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.” ⁸ 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!”

A confession as we begin... When planning this week’s theme to our Hymn & Song Theology sermon series, I did not find “Here I Am, Lord” on any list of most beloved hymns. I did find one list that included favorite praise songs. Though none of the titles resonated with me, “Here I Am, Lord” popped into my head then, and it stayed. I thought of how it was a favorite for many at my previous appointments. I’ve sung it on more than one mission trip. It’s been part of a few people’s stories as we listen and work to discern God’s call for our lives. And as we answer.

When *The United Methodist Hymnal* was published 28 years ago, “Here I Am, Lord” was immediately one of its most popular hymns, although technically it’s not a hymn (since hymns don’t have refrains.) It was written in 1981 as Roman Catholic renewal music after the Second Vatican Council by Wisconsin native, Dan Schutte. One feature of these Catholic renewal is their inspiring and memorable refrain. “Here I Am, Lord” immediately reminds us of Isaiah’s call story that [name] just read. “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!’”

Today, I invite each of us to consider God’s call on our lives. There are a number of call stories in the bible. Moses – who tried all the excuses he could think of before finally conceding to God’s plan, young Samuel who heard God but had to be coached by Eli so he’d know to respond. Of course, Jesus called the twelve disciples, and then later, Paul was called. Today we heard God’s call to the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah was on duty in the temple. It was a day much like any other. He wasn’t expecting anything spectacular. But then – was it suddenly? – Isaiah came up against God’s bigness, God’s amazing power and glory. It was like nothing he’s ever experienced before – majestic, awe-inspiring and probably a little terrifying.

Woe is me! Isaiah was instantly aware of his small, imperfect self. He knew that he and his people had strayed from God's intention for them. Aware and alive as he had never been before, Isaiah was humbled. He wasn't right with God enough to be in God's presence.

The beauty of this moment is that in that moment, centuries before Jesus' birth, we witness God's grace as the sin of Isaiah's wandering is blotted out. As God ever does, God takes the initiative and creates space and opportunity for us to connect with the holy. When Isaiah was cleansed, he was not only ready for relationship with God; he leapt at the chance to be part of God's saving story. Before God had even revealed the plan, Isaiah was saying, "Send me!"

God's grace not only scrubs us clean. It polishes the nugget of who we are, who God knows we can be. In another place in the bible, it's referred to as refiner's fire.

Have you ever noticed as you were singing "Here I Am, Lord" that its point of view changes between the stanzas and the refrain? The stanzas, or verses, speak from the perspective of God in the first person. The refrain stays in the first person, but it's from the singers' perspective. As we sing, it's us offering our lives to God.

Each stanza of song reflects part of the paradox that is God, a puzzle that seems contradictory. The God who is creator of sea and sky, snow and rain, and wind and flame is also the God who hears the people cry, bears the people's pain and tends the poor and lame.

Besides being uplifting, what else would this song teach us? How about transformation? God transforms darkness into light in verse one, melts hearts of stone with love in verse two and nourishes the poor and lame with not just the basics but with the finest bread. God transforms us from what we have been into the people and the churches God needs us to be.

Some of you may be thinking, "Whoa." Not the "Woe is me" kind but rather "Whoa, I like my life as it is." Still, God calls...

"Yes, God. First Church probably could use someone who would keep up with the various ministry teams, making sure we all know who's doing what, and helping each person find their place, but me?" ... "Lord, when I prayed for someone to step up and create an afterschool program for the neighborhood kids, I was thinking of someone else, anyone else. But, um, since you're leading me, all right."

Any of us who have been going to church for a while have no doubt heard our pastors' call stories. I remember one saying that he was student teaching at an area school. He had everything planned out for his life; the future was unfolding as expected. But something didn't feel right. He had this gnawing emptiness down deep. Gnawing, he explained, because he'd always believed that if we were following God's path, there'd be a sense of fulfillment or contentment, and he didn't feel that.

Rick came from generations of teachers, and he knew it is one of the most honorable, fulfilling callings a person can have. No, the problem wasn't teaching. The problem was that some part of him felt that God had other plans. Dreading what might come, he finally asked, "Okay, if not teaching, what then?"

God's response was instant – ordained ministry. "Anything but that!" Rick fought it for months, but eventually agreed. Looking back, he was amazed that he ever questioned his call. I used Rick's experience rather than my own because I may talk about that next week. For now, I'll just say that I could empathize with Rick's shock. This was never on my radar.

Though most people don't talk about God speaking these days, this doesn't change the truth that God does speak. God can connect with us through the words of scripture or, in honesty, anything we read or watch. Friends may speak the words God wants us to hear. We may find surprising insight through others' experiences, the news, or our own prayer or meditation practice. In short, God can connect with us in whatever way will reach us. In rare occasions, it can come so clearly as to be almost audible. It was like that for me.

The challenge is to listen, and then, to respond. A lot of times, we don't want to hear what God would say. We've decided how things are going to happen. We make our plans, then we ask God to bless it, without checking to find out if this is really a God-direction for us. We can do this at home, at work, and in church committees. How often do we have our own perspective and agenda? And we don't really want to consider different one.

We miss God's call in our lives – and in the life of the church – because we're so busy handling everything, so concerned with controlling every detail, that we leave no room for God as Spirit to stir things up and reveal the ways things could be if only we'd let God be involved in the process.

When we open ourselves to the workings of God as Spirit, it won't be business as usual. Samuel was an average temple priest until that day God showed up. But no more. At the end of chapter three, we read that "All Israel... knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord."

Each verse of today's theme song ends with the question, "Whom shall I send?" Although rhetorical questions are common in Christian hymns and songs, this isn't one of them. This is God's question... for each of us. How fully do you own those next words? Do you whisper or sing out boldly as we begin the refrain, "Here I am, Lord?"

You can't know what God might have in store for you – and whether you're eight or eighty, God does have plans, but you can't know – until you open yourself up and pay attention to whatever the message might be.

God is calling, "Whom shall I send?"

What will you answer?

History of the song from "History of Hymns: "Here I Am, Lord," C. Michael Hawn,
umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-here-i-am-lord