



Dr. James C. Howell
Isaiah 6:1-11
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The Bible just makes remarkable claims. It's not a little book of helps to get you through the day, little pithy wisdom, but it tells about the extraordinary acts of God. I mean, the passage at the beginning that we read as the creed, I Corinthians 15. Paul says *Not only did Jesus rise from the dead but there are five hundred people who saw it and a lot of them are alive. Go ask them.* This is something that is startling, this is amazing. God has invaded our reality and set up life down here on earth. God has acted.

In the story from Isaiah, Chapter 6, God acts by calling Isaiah. God speaks to Isaiah and calls him to be a prophet. It happens during a service of worship, during a normal worship service in the temple. We have different thoughts about worship services and I know what we fall into sometimes. We're sort of noticing what's going on, maybe we admire the music. You know, today it's nice to have Michael and Carla back home. Thank you for singing so wonderfully. We sort of admire that. We notice the Scouts. They all look so handsome and they've achieved so much, and we're so proud that they're here today. We hear the sermon, maybe we grade it out.

The other Sunday, somebody was leaving church and told me something I wish he had not told me. He was on his way out and he said, "I noticed that the woman next to me during your sermon was writing feverishly on the bulletin." He said he was really impressed that she was getting so much out of it, she wanted to write it down and think about it later, "but then I looked and it turned out she was writing words like chicken, milk, bread" – her mind was already at the Teeter.

Worship service, I've told you before that Amos Wilder once said "Going to worship is like approaching an open volcano where the world is molten and hearts are sifted. The altar is like a rail that spatters sparks, the sanctuary like a chamber next to an atomic oven. There are invisible rays and you leave your watch outside." It's no one worship service. It is the whole diet of worship services that helps us understand the holiness and the glory of God. There's no one TV show that makes you decadent in your head. You watch one, it's just a TV show, but a steady diet of this over a lifetime you just become crazy in your head and shameful things come to seem normal. It is not holy, holy, holy, is it? But in a lifetime of worship, we discover the holiness of God, the purity of God's heart, the glory of God. In a lifetime of worship services we begin to notice the holiness, the sacredness of the world and of all that is. In a lifetime of worship services, we begin to notice the holiness of God's church. We begin to notice the holiness that is yourself, that is me, that is all of us, holy, holy, holy.

When God calls Isaiah, it's interesting to me that it is, in fact, a conversation, God does not kidnap him and say, "You must be my prophet whether you like it or not." God asks Isaiah, Isaiah objects, God reiterates, Isaiah says something else. It's a genuine conversation. God gives us space to have a conversation, but isn't it the case that once God's appeal has been heard, you really don't have any choice but to respond and say. 'Yes,' right? I mean once you've really heard God call you to something, how could you possibly just ignore it and say 'no' at that point?

I think it's interesting, to me, that in the story the creatures that God uses to speak to Isaiah, cherubim and seraphim, these are winged, angelic creatures. I've always hated winged creatures. I could always deal with, you know, spiders and bugs and snakes, they stay on the ground, you can get

away from them, but flying things like wasps, you just can't get away. You run, and they just come after you. Is God like that? You can't really run. You can't really get away.

It is not that Isaiah has a fantastic experience of God and lives to tell about it. Wow! It was great the encounter with God that I had in the temple. No, it is, in fact, a commission. God calls him to do something. God loves him enough to give him a task and a hard task. I told you many times in sermons, but I love to repeat it. Elie Wiesel once said, "If an angel ever says 'Be not afraid,' you had better watch out because it means a big assignment is on the way." God says *Be not afraid*. God calls us to big assignments and something that is striking about it to me in this call of Isaiah is this: God says *Who will go for us? Who will go for us?* Isaiah is not called so that he can personally have fulfillment in doing what God is calling him to do. God calls him to go for us, for the Body, for the people of God, for the church. Every time one of us does something for God, we do it for the Body. We do it for the glory of God. We do it for the church. Every time you put money in the offering plate, every time you stand up and teach a Sunday School class, every time you lead a Scout troop, every time you go away on a mission trip. When Minister of Missions Kevin Wright goes to Haiti, he doesn't go so that he can be Kevin Wright, super minister, with the cape flying in to do wonders. He goes on behalf of all of us. I see George Ragsdale, when Reverend Ragsdale goes to the hospital, he doesn't go so that he can be a super minister. He goes and represents every one of us. He brings the comfort of the entire church. Who will go for us?

On Tuesday of this week, we hosted a big event in our church. It used to bounce around from church to church and now we've had it for quite a number of years. We enjoy hosting it. The event seems to enjoy being here. It's a gathering of the United Methodist clergy from across the Western North Carolina Conference, and they come here and they enjoy each other's company and the fellowship. We have inspiring speakers who come in, who thrill them and feed their imaginations. It's a lovely gift, I think, that our church gives to the ministers around here. The other day, they were in Jubilee Hall and there was a speaker up there who was doing great things, and they were all in rapt attention, and I was standing in the back, and I looked at all of them and some I know very well and some I barely know, and I was so struck by these clergy who were there. Some are tall and some are short and some are men and some are women and some are old and some are young and some are really smart and some try really hard. Some are young and excited about what ministry is going to be like. Some have been doing it for awhile and they're a little bit broken by all that's happened. Some are just full of dreams of the great way that God will use them, and others have been wounded by their work and by their life and everything in between. What struck me about that is that at some point, all of those clergy could have done something else in the world but, instead, when they heard God say *Who will go for us?*, they each one said "Here I am, send me." And when I thought of that, I thought of you because all of you today, you could have done something else, but you came here because you want to be the kind of people who, when God says *Who will go for us?*, you're the kind of people who want to say, "Here I am, send me. Here we are, send us." So we in the church go, we in the church go.

You know, somebody asked me the other day – we've done all these extraordinary things for Haiti – I believe Kevin will share with you the amount of money that we've raised for Haiti, and he's going back next week. We had a fundraiser last night, money for Haiti. Somebody asked me about this the other day, and it was a good question. This person said, "Why do we bother pouring all these resources into Haiti? It's a terrible country with awful challenges and they have an awful infrastructure, and no matter what we do, they'll still continue to have an awful infrastructure and terrible challenges before them forever. The only answer that I could think of came from what Václav Havel when he was the president of Czechoslovakia and the Iron Curtain was still up, the Berlin Wall had not yet come down, he faced fierce challenges, and he said this: "Hope is the ability to do

something simply because it is right, whether it stands a chance of succeeding or not." Hope is the ability to do something simply because it is right, whether it stands a chance of succeeding or not. We have brothers and sisters in Haiti who are suffering, and it is the right thing to go in to help them, whether it will succeed or not.

Some of you take your time and you go out and tutor some child here in Charlotte and you hope that will succeed and that they will go to college one day and that all will be well, but still, it is the right thing to do. Every time you fold your hands in prayer and sometimes I know you do it desperately, it may succeed, it may not succeed, but there is a God and to pray to God is the right thing to do because we are people of hope, and people of hope do the right thing. We follow God.

I was in a little bit of sentimental mood this week, I don't know why. That Tuesday when I was looking at those clergy listening to the speaker, they were loving the speaker and I was ruminating over them and their lives and our friendship and their call to ministry. It made me think about my own call to ministry. When I was young I didn't know what I wanted to do when I grew up. I thought about a lot of things. I had people saying "Go in the Air Force, go to medicine, go to law, be an accountant" all kinds of things people were asking me to do, and I thought God had said "Go be a minister." I was surprised by that, and my friends were surprised by that, and I felt utterly unable to do such a thing. In those days, I couldn't stand in front of 10 people and say anything, and to this day, it's still harder than you can imagine, to stand up here and talk in front of a crowd. I get really nervous, I get jittery and I kind of pace on Sunday mornings, I don't sleep well on Saturday night. One thing that helps me to do this that I have to do and get to do is something that was said to me one of the first times I ever spoke in front of people. I was in seminary at Duke and there was a professor who had asked me to come and speak to his class of undergraduates. I don't think I had ever stood in front of people before to talk and certainly not to talk about God. I prepared at great lengths so I would know everything that I needed to know. I was on West Campus and had to take the bus over to East Campus to give this talk, and I was just terrified. I was so nervous I didn't know what to do. I was on the bus and was kind of doing this (shuffling) and I was so scared and just by the grace of God, there was a retired professor who was wise and had been kind of a mentor to me standing next to me and he said, "What is wrong with you?" I said, "I'm about to go and teach this class and I'm just so scared, I'm just so nervous, I'm afraid that I won't do well." He said, "That's ridiculous." I found that to be helpful when he said that and I said, "I just, I can't, I'm nervous." He said, "OK, what are you talking about today?" It was on Isaiah and I said, "I'm talking about Isaiah." He said, "Isaiah is great. You don't have to be." Then he looked me in the eye and said "Trust your material." Isaiah is great. I don't have to be. Those of us who preach, we're the luckiest people in the world. We don't have to be great. We don't have to be eloquent. We don't have to be anything. We have great material. And this applies to you. You don't have to be great. You don't have to be super pious. You don't have to be a great prayer warrior. You don't have to be super holy. You don't have to be agile as a servant to God. You don't have to be any of that because God is great. You don't have to be. All you have to do is to come to worship and hear God say, "Who will go for us?" And you'll think, "Me, me, me." But you don't stop with me. It's a conversation and God says "Yes, you." Then you say, "Here I am, Lord. Send me. Here I am." And when we go and we realize the greatness of God, then all really is holy, holy, holy.

Amen.