

All Volunteer Force

Isaiah 6: 1-8

This may be the all-time terrible title for a sermon, but it has a history for me. When I was in high school, I participated in forensics: speech and debate competitions. Perhaps not surprisingly, my event was Original Oratory. I wrote a speech advocating a position on an issue. Then I memorized the speech and would recite it at every competition. By end of the school year, you came to know the speeches of all your competitors really well and you got really tired of your own speech! In my senior year, the speech I wrote advocated the adoption of an all-volunteer military. At that time, the draft for Vietnam was a hot topic. There was lots of discussion of this issue in our society. The draft ended not much later and the all-volunteer military force has become normal for the United States.

The memory of that issue and that speech came back to me when I read today's scripture passage. It was Isaiah's call to his vocation, his work as a prophet. Perhaps this was an autobiographical account of his experience. Perhaps it was a vision the historical Isaiah had in the Jerusalem Temple that led to his career decision.

Several realities hit at once for Isaiah. He lived near Jerusalem, in the southern kingdom of Judah during time when the northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed by the Assyrian empire. Then, King Uzziah had died after a fifty-two year reign. At first he was a good king, just and God-fearing. Then, he was seduced by the power of his office and lost sight of God's law. Uzziah developed a skin disease, perhaps leprosy, and was therefore excluded from the Temple for the rest of his life. The king's long illness became an image of the nation of Judah headed toward its own apocalypse.

Isaiah's vision struck him with the reality of the majesty of Israel's God and the clarity of how far his own people were from realizing God's hopes, dreams, and expectations for them. This realization was brought on by a moment of insight and spiritual reality: "Holy, holy, Holy, Lord God of hosts." (Is. 6:3) As the result of a profound experience of prayer and the powerful emotions of worship, Isaiah seemed to feel that he had hit *rock bottom*. And he offered a confession for himself and for his nation as "people of unclean lips." (Is. 6:5) Then the call: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" (Is. 6:8)

Isaiah responded with his life, exemplified by his words, "Here I am. Send me" (Is. 6:8) You and I are in the same place as Isaiah in many ways. We experience moments of deep, emotional, perhaps even religious experience. In times of clear, sometimes troubling, clarity and realization we are moved to confession. In these nodal moments of life, our direction and sometimes vocational choices – definitely our life choices – can be reshaped.

So this brings me back to that original image for this sermon, the volunteer nature of *God's Army*. For purposes of this illustration, let me invite you to let go of any negative images you may have of the military or the idea of *God's Army* as militaristic, violent, or coercive. The image I have in mind is the commitment to service many soldiers exemplify. There is a willingness to step up, step out, and confront evil that I admire. We do well to model a courage to place our lives at risk for the values we hold most important.

None of us ultimately can be drafted into *God's Army*. We are a force of volunteers, including those of us for whom ministry is our profession, our career. We choose! We're not coerced to

serve – not drafted – and it is a choice we must keep making throughout our lives. There is no other way to live awake to the reality of living in God but to say, “Here I am, send me!” Being church means standing up, stepping forward, and saying with our lives, “Here we are. Send us!”

Each of us lives a life that is really a journey, a process of growth and discovery of the of the knowledge of ourselves. The inward journey you take either feeds or fails to feed your outward journey -- how and what you do. Your journey is your journey, yours to choose, yours to travel. The questions are yours to ask and yours to clarify. The answers are yours to seek. Your wisdom is yours to embrace because, “If you are going to be yourself, you are not going to fit anybody else’s” idea of who you are. (John Howard Griffin, *Thomas Merton, the Hermitage Years*)

As Christians, we often describe the journey as *following Jesus*, but as though the goal is to copy Jesus, imitate him exactly. The real goal needs to be to follow his example of living openly and fully in God -- fully committed to the values we understand as being of God: love, peace, justice, compassion, and equity. We need to let these values have expression in our own lives, our own way. The inward journey is really a process of learning more fully who we are and of making choices about what we do -- our work and our outer focus. The outward journey is about doing what brings you life!

It’s a challenge to be that committed, to give your life in that kind of service and live with such courage and purpose. The challenge and privilege for each of us is to be on this journey with intention, but no one can do it alone, not with success. Author Parker Palmer reminded us, “we need trustworthy relationships, tenacious communities of support to move toward wholeness and an] undivided life” (*A Hidden Wholeness*, 10)

And so there is church, a sacred community that helps us stay connected to the faith tradition and and scripture without being constricted by it. Is it possible in this modern world to stay connected to the teachings on which the Christian church had its beginning while also being able to follow new insights through the promptings of our own God-given imaginations? Simply put – yes! It is not only possible, but essential and desirable! The teachings of the past can be clarified and deepened by our experience and understanding of the present, and by our experience of the Spirit in our lives. Our theological imagination needs to be grounded by accountability to the experience of the ages so that each of us can develop our own understanding of who God is, who we are, and why we’re here. Such knowledge exists for us in a working tension. The church provides support, teaching, and opportunity to live and grow in such a working tension.

Church holds space to support our journey. It is a circle of community that can and should respect our own process while also pushing us to keep seeking. It is a community that will never dessert us, but always refrain from trying to fix us: tell us how we should be living and what we should believe in order to be good! The psalmist gave insight about what the church can help us see. We need to learn to trust that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made. and we know this very well” -- very well. (Psalm 139:14)

It is your own sacred journey you walk, your own holy pathway you create. As church, we can help each other come to have faith in ourselves, in what God is doing through us, and in the God presence that lives within each of us. Many times we just “do not trust ourselves or our perceptions enough. We do not value what we see, hear, or feel, or how we move, relate, or experience the world.” (Arnold and Amy Mindell, *Riding the Horse Backwards*)

So we need to live (and often gather) as the community of faith not only to praise God, in whose very life we live and move and have our being. We need to be church together to teach and remind each other that

there is an inner reality within each of us [that] is like a great treasure lying hidden in the field of our soul waiting to be discovered. When [we] find this inner treasure and recognize its value. (*A Hidden Wholeness*)

We have the opportunity to “give up all other goals and ambitions in order to make it real in [our] lives.” (*A Hidden Wholeness*) I invite and challenge you now -- right now – to recognize and value the treasure that is your life, inside and out. I invite you to choose to “give up all other goals and ambitions in order to make this treasure your own. I challenge you to realize what you can do and who you already are, in Jesus’ name.

You may make this commitment your own:

There is within us a strong desire
to serve the values we believe reflect
 who God is and
 who I am,
 who we are as people
to live with
 courage
 and compassion,
to work for
 justice
 peace
 and equity
 in our lives

We choose to commit ourselves to this work
as individuals
and as the sacred community of faith
to give and receive support
for the journeys we are on

We choose to trust and cooperate
with the work
God is doing
in each other
and in ourselves

Amen and Amen.

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. ²Seraphs 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. ³And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." ⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵And 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!" ⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷The 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." ⁸Then 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!"