



Are You Available?

Isaiah 6:1-8; Mark 4:26-32

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Washington Street UMC

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Sixteen years ago yesterday was my first Sunday as pastor of this church. It was also my birthday. And on that first Sunday you gave me a party. And I knew immediately that I was going to like this church..... Seriously the warmth and the caring I experienced that day were exciting, and the beginning of perhaps the three most enjoyable years of my ministry. Katherine has always said I retired too soon, and I think I've come to believe she was probably right.

But you all seem to be doing just fine. And from all I see and hear and read that warmth and caring are still very much alive, and you are ever seeking new opportunities to reach out and plant seeds of the Kingdom. And now you have beautifully renovated this sanctuary that all of us love for the glory of God and for folks today and for future generations to worship in and experience the comfort and the strength and the challenge of God's presence.

So I must tell you when I receive Thomas' email inviting me to preach here on this Sunday I was excited and thrilled and honored and humbled. In the month since I've mostly panicked. I've rediscovered what I knew for 35 years of ministry and that is sermon preparation, at least for me, is not easy, especially if you're out of practice. If you preach every week, you kind of get in a rhythm. If not, it's a lot harder. In short, it's not quite like riding a bicycle. But I'll do my best, and I know you'll cut me a little slack. It's great to be here, and I look forward to visiting with you after the service.

The sixth chapter of Isaiah, the story of Isaiah's call has always been one of my favorite passages. It was the year that King Uzziah died—whatever year that was. We may not know exactly when it was, but you can be sure that Isaiah's first readers did. It was a very definite point in history. And it was memorable because King Uzziah had been a pretty good king as kings of Israel went. But as we know when times are good, we often take those good times for granted and forget the true source of the goodness. We also know how quickly things can change, how quickly times can become much less certain, much more confusing. What was to become of God's people now that the King, God's anointed one, was gone?

Isaiah tells us that in that year when King Uzziah died he went to the Temple, and he said, "I saw the Lord"—no mistake about it. The Lord was high and lifted up; God's presence filled the Temple. And seraphs flew all around. Have you ever seen a seraph? I'm pretty sure I haven't, and I'm not at all sure I want to. Six wings, two to cover their faces, two to cover their feet (that's biblical for genitals) and two to fly with. And they sang pretty loud "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the earth is full of his glory." And the whole Temple shook to its foundations. On a religious experience scale of one to ten, it was a twelve or thirteen. But it certainly didn't

create in any warm and fuzzy feelings for Isaiah. Instead of being overcome with joy Isaiah was filled with dread. "Woe is me for I am lost," he said, "I am a man of unclean lips from a people of unclean lips." But just at that moment one of the seraphs came to the rescue. Holding a live coal from the altar in a pair of tongs and touching Isaiah's lips with it, the seraph pronounced him forgiven—healed, clean, right. Then Isaiah heard the very voice of God asking, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" And immediately, without hesitating, maybe even without thinking, without asking what the assignment might involve. Isaiah responded, "Here I am. Send me."

Now I don't know about you but I know for myself that I have never experienced anything exactly like that. And yet, and yet, I also know from my own experience and from the experiences of people like you and the experience of the church and the experience of people of faith in the scriptures that we all experience something like this. There's an unmistakable pattern here in our experience of faith. In most cases it's probably not nearly as dramatic or intense as Isaiah's experience. But the basic pattern of our experience is the same.

It looks like this. We come to worship God out of our need. Maybe it's our need to give thanks. Maybe our faith fuel gauges running pretty low. Maybe something has gone very wrong in our lives. Maybe there's just a gnawing feeling that something is missing. Maybe we've just received a disturbing diagnosis. Maybe a loved one or a close friend has died. Maybe we're more than a little concerned about the state of our country. Maybe a thousand and one other needs. But out of that need we come to worship—seeking God. And God in his grace meets us in our need. If we will make ourselves available to God, if we will open the door of our hearts just a smidgen, God will meet us in our need. (Though I need to be honest and say it not always, maybe not even often, in the ways we hoped for or expected.) But whether it's in an overwhelming experience like Isaiah's, or in a still, small voice or in just an inner feeling, we know we have met the Lord. God has provided.

And then very often God calls. God says, "I need you; I've got something for you to do." And maybe we don't always say, "Here I am. Send me," quite as enthusiastically as Isaiah. But if in one way or another we say, "Ok, I'll try. I'll give it a shot. I'm available," God will use us. And over and over again down through the years but, maybe even especially today, you, this community of faith called Washington Street have heard God's call and responded. Sometimes like Isaiah we discover that the job is impossibly difficult, sometimes it's not quite that hard, sometimes it's easier than we think. But whatever it is, God is there providing the guidance and strength, the help we need. God is there, as Jesus teaches in the parable we read this morning, being the gracious ground that causes the little seeds we sow to flourish, to become the healthy, living signs of God's kingdom. Sometimes we see these plants grow and we can rejoice; sometimes we see the results of our seed planting, we see the tiny seed become the great mustard plant. But sometimes we don't see the results of our work, we can only trust that God, in God's own good time, will bring a harvest. And so we pray that God's kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven. But we know that God in his grace has given us the incredible privilege and the awesome responsibility of planting the seeds of the kingdom. And by God's grace there will be a harvest.

Now since a main focus of our worship here today is the rededication of this worship space that we so love, let me just drop back for a moment to our OT lesson to remind us all again that Isaiah's experience takes place in the Temple. Of course we all know we can worship God anywhere, we can experience God's presence anywhere, we can hear and answer God's call anywhere. Praise God. We've all heard that. We may have all said that. I must even admit that I've made that argument a little more often since I retired. But mostly, most of us, most of the time worship God most intentionally in a sanctuary, in a place set aside for worship. So it is very appropriate here today that we thank God for those who build this sanctuary, for those who have lovingly maintained it over the years and for all those members and non-members alike who have sought God's presence here, who have found God's help here and who have gone from here inspired and encouraged to plant the seeds of God's Kingdom. And especially we give thanks today for Helen Bradford's and Archibald Lyons' gifts that have made possible the renovation of this Temple in such a way that it can continue to be a place where people today and for generations to come can seek God and in turn to make themselves available to God to plant the seeds of the Kingdom.

Now when I got to this point in my sermon preparation I asked myself how you are going to end this, how do I want to tie it all together? And as I read back over what I had written, one word kind of jumped out at me. I'd ask you to take a guess as to what it might be, but you're smart folks, you've read the sermon title, so you know. Available. Availability. It's probably not high on most lists of characteristics of discipleship, but maybe it should be. The old hymn says, "Are ye Able said the Master?" And most of the time, if I'm honest, my answer is no. At least a lot of the time I don't feel particularly able. I'm not sure how able Isaiah was for all that God had in mind for him. But he was available. And you see if God calls, as God surely will, maybe you and I can at least be available. And the real miracle is what God by his grace can do with our availability.

So when we get out of bed on Sunday morning and decide to go to church and get dressed and drive down here and try to find a place to park that's the beginning of availability. But obviously it doesn't stop there. Being available really means coming to worship with an open mind and an open heart, coming with a vulnerability, and coming honestly seeking God. If we do, we can count on God to do God's part. God will meet us in our need. God will touch us and bless us. God will give us what we need, though as we said earlier not necessarily what we expect or ask for or hope for. God will give us what we need. And then God will call us; God will give us our assignment. Sometimes we're surprised. A lot of the time we'll already know exactly what it is. And the only question remaining for us is not whether we're able—likelihood is we're not. The question is are we available. If we are, God will take those seeds that in our availability we plant grow them into glorious signs of God's kingdom in this broken world that somehow God still so loves.