

# Sermons from

## First Congregational Church

### of Southington

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Who, Me?

Isaiah 6.1-13

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

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Isaiah 6.1-13

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. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>And one called to another and said:

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

<sup>4</sup>The pivots<sup>[a]</sup> on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. <sup>5</sup>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!”

<sup>6</sup>Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. <sup>7</sup>The seraph<sup>[b]</sup> touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” <sup>8</sup>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!” <sup>9</sup>And he said, “Go and say to this people:

‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend;  
keep looking, but do not understand.’

<sup>10</sup>Make the mind of this people dull,

and stop their ears,

and shut their eyes,

so that they may not look with their eyes,

and listen with their ears,

and comprehend with their minds,

and turn and be healed.”

<sup>11</sup>Then I said, “How long, O Lord?” And he said:

“Until cities lie waste

without inhabitant,

and houses without people,

and the land is utterly desolate;

<sup>12</sup>until the Lord sends everyone far away,

and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.

<sup>13</sup>Even if a tenth part remain in it,

it will be burned again,  
like a terebinth or an oak  
whose stump remains standing  
when it is felled.”<sup>[1]</sup>  
The holy seed is its stump.

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### I.

I begin with a story about how the call of the prophet Isaiah grabbed hold of me this week—a silly story but it got me to thinking. I love the stuff about seraphim flying around singing holy, holy, holy and the great voice from the throne looking for someone to send and Isaiah answering, “Here am I; send me!”—there’s a great song based on that verse...

But that isn’t what grabbed me.

What grabbed me was the memory of a day more than 30 years ago in the first church that trusted me to be their pastor just outside of Rochester, New York. I remember a Bible study I led on a Wednesday morning—a favorite time of the week, I love Bible studies—then heading off to a local nursing home to lead a worship service—another thing I really love doing.

Yet, this particular Wednesday, things did not go as well as I had hoped. The Bible study, on the passage from Isaiah that Dan just read, was fine. I had prepared what I felt was an invigorating mini sermon for the residents of the nursing home. But they were particularly sleepy that morning. Two minutes into my fascinating homily—I don’t remember the topic—all but one of the faithful had fallen asleep. In another minute of two, the neck of the one who had remained alert through the first two minutes turned to Jell-O as well. Halfway through, all of them were sound asleep.

Then I said with Isaiah, “How long, O Lord?”

Yes, it’s a silly example but a reminder that people don’t always listen to prophets.

### II.

In the year that King Uzziah died, about 742 BCE, God was looking for someone to send. The prophet Isaiah writes, “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’” Fortunately, a courageous prophet stood nearby.

And it is a magnificent story, the kind of stuff a Hollywood producer would love. Fire and smoke and earthquakes, buildings shaking and a voice from on high.

This is great stuff.

Isaiah must have been tremendously inspired but sees that he is inadequate. “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!” But God has an answer even for that. With a fiery coal Isaiah is purified. Don’t take this fiery coal too literally. In the Old Testament, fire is almost always something that purifies, not harms, like a refiner’s fire.

The seraph tells Isaiah straight out, “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” And Isaiah is ready.

So, when the voice of the Lord sitting on the throne proclaims, “Whom shall I send?” Isaiah is ready and without even thinking jumps up to volunteer. “Here am I; send me.”

### III.

It is very unprophetlike behavior on Isaiah’s part. Most prophets don’t want to go when God calls. Moses said he didn’t know how to speak; Jeremiah says he is too young; Jonah says he just doesn’t want to. Prophets generally put up some kind of protest.

But even Isaiah, when he gets the job description, after having already said yes of course, begins to wonder a bit at all this prophet stuff. God tells him straight out what he must do and how the people will react:

*And he said, “Go and say to this people:  
‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend;  
keep looking, but do not understand.’”*

So, Isaiah has to backtrack a bit: *How long, O Lord?*

How long will it take until the people will hear?

And that is our question as well.

Here we are a church having heard God’s call to do some good, to spread the love of God and the compassion of Jesus Christ, but we are still emerging from a pandemic. It’s been nearly two years and we seem to face the same needs, the same struggles.

How long, O Lord?

And in our lives, too—doesn’t it seem like each day bring the same aches, the same pains. We work hard, but it’s hard to get ahead. We want to make a difference, do our best, but when we look around it’s hard to tell if anything has changed. The figurative congregations each of us face have fallen asleep.

How long, O Lord?

### IV.

As I thought on these things, I was beginning to get depressed, then I remembered a young woman who told me the first time I met her that she wanted to be a minister. Laura had come to work for the summer at the New York City mission center where I was a seminarian in charge of the summer mission trip program. A rising junior at Auburn University, her summer trip to New York was the first time she had ever been north of Atlanta. She and four other college students had been with me as summer interns for two weeks now, and they were just beginning to get over the shock of being in a

dangerous and struggling neighborhood in this huge, scary city so far away from the things that were familiar to them. Now I was about to send her on a mission that she obviously did not want to accept.

“You want to send me where?!” Her voice had a shrill quality to it that made it clear to me she did not care to accept the assignment I had just given her. I did not answer quickly enough so she said again, this time more loudly, “You want to send me where?!” “I want to send you camping,” I told her, “with the middle school boys.”

If looks could kill, I would not be standing here this morning. She had seen the way this group of inner-city boys behaved and spending a weekend with them on the campground at Bear Mountain State Park was not her idea of a good time.

“I have to be here this weekend,” I told her, “and I have to send one more chaperon. You are the only one who can do it.” I tried to be reassuring. I quoted Isaiah, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us.”

She glared.

It was a joke, I said.

She didn’t laugh.

I knew she and the two of the other interns could do it. I expressed my confidence that she could handle this group of boys. I even told her that she was bigger than they were so if worse came to worst she could beat them up, that she had my expressed permission to do so—I was kidding, of course, and she knew it. It seemed like all my persuasiveness would prove futile, until finally, to my complete surprise, she gave in. “Oh, all right. I will go.” And so, she did. I sent Laura, two other summer interns and nine little boys camping.

She knew it would be a long weekend, that those boys would not be easy to manage. I knew she could handle it, but I’m sure she was thinking, how long, O Lord, before I get back to Alabama?

When God calls us, like God when called Isaiah, God does not promise it will be easy. In fact, there is some evidence to the contrary.

But the good news is that when God calls it is not for us to do or be something we are not. God calls you to be who you are, and to do God’s work in the world. I think that is what Paul was getting at when he wrote to the Corinthian church,

*For I am the least of the apostles...But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> [1 Corinthians 15.9-10](#)

By the grace of God, I am what I am, Paul says, and God doesn't expect me to be any more than that. God simply expects you and me to do the work to which God has called us. And God has called you to be God's hands and feet and voice in this world, to understand that every person is a beloved child of God worthy of our love.

But not only that, I am what I am—you are what you are because God made **you** as God's own special and beloved child. So, while there is much work to do, God's call begins when you understand that you are loved, you are called, and that God has given you all you need for the journey, even when people don't listen, and things don't go well and all we can do is stop and ask...

How long, O Lord?

To my relief, Laura, nine boys, and two other summer interns returned from their camping trip in one piece. They looked tired, but I saw in Laura's eyes that she was glad that she went. She sat down in my office and told me how hard it was, how much the boys misbehaved, how long the weekend had been, how badly she wanted to go back to Alabama.

But about that time Eli, eight years old, three feet tall, probably about that big around, and still caked with dirt from the camping trip, came bursting through my door. He gave Laura a huge hug and said, "Thanks for taking us camping!" A smile came to her face in that moment of grace. "Here am I, send me!" she said with a sly grin as she disappeared with Eli out my office door.

What is God calling *you* to do?

Do you dare take the chance to answer as Isaiah did?

*"Here am I; send me!"*