

The Mission Is for the Ordinary

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a six-week series

September 24, 2017

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Isaiah 6:1–8 (CEB)

In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a high and exalted throne, the edges of his robe filling the temple. ²Winged creatures were stationed around him. Each had six wings: with two they veiled their faces, with two their feet, and with two they flew about. ³They shouted to each other, saying:

“Holy, holy, holy”

is the LORD of heavenly forces!

All the earth

is filled with God's glory!

⁴The doorframe shook at the sound of their shouting, and the house was filled with smoke.

⁵I said, “Mourn for me; I'm ruined! I'm a man with unclean lips, and I live among a people with unclean lips. Yet I've seen the king, the LORD of heavenly forces!”

⁶Then one of the winged creatures flew to me, holding a glowing coal that he had taken from the altar with tongs. ⁷He touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips. Your guilt has departed, and your sin is removed.”

⁸Then I heard the Lord's voice saying, “Whom should I send, and who will go for us?” I said, “I'm here; send me.”

John 20:19–23 (CEB)

¹⁹It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. ²¹Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.” ²²Then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you don't forgive them, they aren't forgiven.”

Don't think you are ready to run? You are . . . with God's help.

The Creator of all has been working to restore the cosmos and to reconcile an estranged humanity to himself. Surely, to the extent this Creator wants any help with the project, such help would have to come from the extraordinary among us, those whose gifts and talents are beyond dispute or reproach. Surely, this work can move forward without the help of the . . . well, ordinary. When we have tough and enormous job before us, who do we call on? The best and the brightest, of course. Not much room in that for the . . . well, ordinary.

But even the most cursory review of the Bible reveals that God has always chosen to work through the most ordinary of us all. Just think about the birth of our Lord. Jesus was born to two peasants from a no-account village far north of Jerusalem. Not Rome. Not Alexandria. Not to emperors or priests. And this is not a one-off choice by God. Who was Abraham or Isaac or Jacob? Or Moses, the run-away murdering vigilante. Even David, the least impressive of the seven sons of Jesse. How about Jesus' disciples? Fishermen from Galilee. Yep – just the folks we'd look for if we wanted to turn the world upside down. We wouldn't choose them, but God did. God chose them all, just as God chose you and me.

Take Isaiah as an example. It is a very dramatic scene in Isaiah 6 when he comes into the temple but we know very little about Isaiah. He was from Jerusalem, married, with two sons. He was the son of Amoz and a contemporary of Micah. He preached in the kingdom of Judah at the time the northern kingdom was swept away by the Assyrians. But is there anything about Isaiah that would lead us to think he would be among the most significant of all the prophets? No. But perhaps it was never really about Isaiah, but about God instead. About what God would do for and with Isaiah. Gene Tucker

helps us to see more clearly that God made Isaiah ready for the work he would be given by God.

For generations of readers, Isaiah has been lifted up as the heroic model of the servant of God. But this heroism—if it is that—did not appear out of thin air. For the prophetic voice that reports the call and commission, the sequence of events leading up to this point is important. There had been the encounter with the presence of God, confession, a ritual of purification, overhearing the Lord addressing the heavenly council, and then acceptance of the commission. It is also important that God does not address Isaiah directly, but the one purified by the divine messenger is able to hear the call and accept the commission to go as God’s representative, to take the place of the angels. The prophet could proclaim the most difficult message because he had experienced the presence of the God whose glory fills the whole earth.

Although at that critical moment the prophet shows no hesitation, there are two points of resistance. Isaiah’s first words confess his unworthiness (6:5), and he intercedes for the people when he learns the message he is to bring (6:11a). The persistence of reluctance or resistance in vocation reports indicates that resistance to the call is not linked so much to individual personalities as it is to the experience of standing in the presence of God. It is part of the office, even verifying that one is called by God, to feel unworthy in one way or another. . . .¹

Perhaps it is true for all of us, when it comes to the work God has for us, it is about what God does with and for us rather than we can do for ourselves. Besides, we have help that Isaiah didn’t. We have the Holy Spirit, who dwells in the hearts of all God’s people. Isaiah had to go into the temple to experience the presence of God. We have the empowering presence of God, his Spirit, with us every day.

That is why John includes a Pentecost moment near the end of his gospel. He wants to assure all Christ’s disciples that God is with us in our work, in our mission. However, people often trip over this passage. Two Pentecosts?? Doesn’t the Holy Spirit arrive *after* Jesus’ resurrection and ascension? Admittedly, there are a lot of issues here, but Don Carson suggests that the passage is best seen as an “acted parable” by Jesus.

Jesus’ ‘exhalation’ and command *Receive the Holy Spirit* are best understood as a kind of acted parable pointing forward to the full endowment [in Jerusalem during Pentecost] still to come (though in the past for John’s readers). A suitable Johannine analogy might be the washing of the disciples’ feet: ‘Unless I wash you, you have no part with me’ (13:8). That can be read at a simplistic level as exhausted in the footwashing. Readers with more insight understand that the footwashing itself points forward to the spiritual washing achieved by the Lamb of God whose death takes away the sin of the world. John has repeatedly developed these anticipating steps in his narrative; it is not surprising if he uses one more to show that the story does not end with his book.²

Indeed, the story does not end with John’s book. You and I are part of that story. We have been sent by God into the world to make disciples, to be Jesus’ hands and feet. Yes, we might feel inadequate to the task, but so what. Moses felt inadequate and so did Isaiah. Good for them. It is not about their inadequacy or our own. It is about God’s adequacy.

One of my favorite examples is John Wesley. He had formed Holy Clubs at Oxford and been a missionary to Georgia, all before he had his life-changing experience when he was nearly forty. Yet he came to refer to himself in his 20’s and 30’s as an “almost Christian” or as we put it at St. Andrew, “Christian-ish.” He knew that his mission to

¹ Tucker, G. M. (1994–2004). The Book of Isaiah 1–39. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Vol. 6, p. 104). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

² Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 655). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

Georgia had been a disappointment. Yet, we all know what God would go on to accomplish through Wesley.

Most of us certainly have identified with Wesley's struggles at one time or another. We ask ourselves questions like these:

- Am I more lukewarm than passionate?
- Am I more of a casual Christian than a committed Christian?
- Does my heart ever cry out: "My God and my all"?
- Do I really trust Jesus? In all things?
- Do I truly love my neighbor as I love myself and as Christ loves me?

The Christian walk is not an ever-upward slope. But regardless of how we might have answered these questions five years ago, today, or five years from now – the point is that God has chosen to rely on us through it all. God has sent us forth into the world. We were born to walk, to run even. Yes, we don't think we are up to the task. And if it were all about ourselves, we wouldn't be. But it is not. Yes, God has sent us out there, but never alone. Not only do we have other Christians beside us, but the very Spirit of Christ is with each of us, encouraging us, empowering us, making us wise.

John's Gospel

John's gospel is different. Written late in the first century by John, the youngest of Jesus' disciples, the gospel bears little resemblance to the synoptic gospels (Matt/Mark/Luke). Very few of the incidents in John are also found in the synoptics. John's gospel has very little in the way of ethical teachings such as we find in the Sermon on the Mount. John writes so that "you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." (20:31).

In the synoptics, miracles are a means for Jesus to enact the reality of God's kingdom. In John's gospel, the miracles are signposts to Jesus' identity and nature. In the synoptic gospels, Jesus' true identity is often a secret to be protected until the right time. In John's gospel, Jesus' glory is revealed from the very beginning. For example, Jesus' first miracle is the changing of water into wine. John tells us that, "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him" (2:11).

Here are a few ideas to keep in mind as you read John's Gospel:

- John binds together the already/not yet, emphasizing that God's kingdom has come already . . . but not yet! Jesus says "Those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed" (3:17) and "anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life" (5:24) As Richard Hays notes, this means that "for those in the believing community, eternal life is now." The glory of God's kingdom is fully revealed and present in Jesus.
- The immediate reality of God's kingdom is accomplished through the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus says "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever." (14:15) This Advocate/Helper teaches us, the community of believers, all things and reminds us of what Jesus said.
- In this community of faith, we are called to love one another just as Jesus has loved us. Rather than give us long passages of Jesus' teachings, John gives us the enacted parable of Jesus' washing the disciples' feet (chapter 13), leading us to see Jesus' sacrificial love on the cross several chapters later.

God has chosen us. Doubts, weaknesses, warts, and all. Let us not shrink back out of timidity, but let us push forward, lifted up by God and ready to run.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The discussion questions for this series are drawn from the curriculum for our Connection Groups, which will be meeting throughout the series. The questions were written by Rev. Allison Jean.

1. Sometimes, there are only certain parts of our lives that are “Christian-ish.” What area of your life do you feel is most “Christian-ish” at this time? Why?
2. When have you had a “Christian-ish” season in your life where you have paused or even moved backward in your faith life? What was that season like? How did you move forward from it?
3. Share about an experience or missional activity that you were scared or intimidated to do at first, but that you’ve become more comfortable with over time. How did you develop trust through your experiences? How did this affect your relationship with God?
4. The most important thing the disciples seemed to receive from Christ before being sent out was the Holy Spirit. How does this broaden our understanding of people following Christ’s mission?

Daily Bible Readings

This week: *More on the ordinary people God calls on*

Monday, Genesis 12:1-4 God calls Abraham.

Tuesday, Genesis 25: 19-26 Jacob will be the child of the promise.

Wednesday, Jeremiah 1:4-10 God calls Jeremiah.

Thursday, Jonah 1:1-5 Yes, God can use even Jonah!

Friday, Mark 1:16-20 Jesus calls his first disciples.

Saturday, Colossians 4:7-15 Some of the assorted folks that are part of Paul’s ministry and these first Christian communities.

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Exodus.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of James

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott’s 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

The current series: *Jesus Behaving Badly*

Coming up: *The Old Testament: Sacred and Strange*