

FOUNDATIONS FOR
LAITY RENEWAL

Transforming Daily Life

719 Earl Garrett Street
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Three Sermon Outlines on

Work and Faith

Called to Love

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SERMON NOTES

***The
High Calling
of Our
Daily Work***

*Making a real living connects you to a bigger picture,
a grand design, an abundant life.*

*Each of us has only a small part to play, but what a part!
It's the high calling of our daily work.*

– Howard Butt, Jr., of Laity Lodge
TheHighCalling.org

Sermon 1: What's Your Purpose?

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. 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. And one called to another and said:

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

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. 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!”

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The 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.” 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!”

Theological Point: God speaks to our need for meaning and purpose in our lives by calling us to do God’s work in the world. Our calling is our vocation—the work to which God calls us. What’s your purpose? What’s your calling?

Introduction: A call story

- A. What’s Your Purpose?**
- B. Isaiah’s Story**
- C. Living Your Call**

Conclusion: Will we go?

Introduction: A call story. While there are a number of possible themes for preaching in this passage, the primary thrust of the story is God’s call of the prophet Isaiah and Isaiah’s response.

Isaiah 6:1-8 is a classic example of a “call narrative.” Biblical scholarship has shown that call narratives generally reflect similar recurring patterns or themes. For example, the call experiences of Moses (Exodus 3:1-4:17), Gideon (Judges 6:11-32), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1), Amos (Amos 3:8; 7:1-9, 14-15; 8:1-9:4), Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1-3), and Peter (Luke 5:1-11) show fascinating similarities to the Isaiah story in literary structure and themes. Elements of these stories include: an encounter with God, an introductory word, the commissioning, the objection by the one called, the message or task, and the assurance of God’s empowering presence.

Preaching on Isaiah 6:1-8, therefore, one might take time to review the similarities between the experience of Isaiah and these other biblical figures who encountered the call of God in their lives. In a sermon, one might draw upon the experiences of Moses, Jeremiah or Peter, for example, to enrich the sermon on Isaiah and illustrate the broader biblical theme of calling.

These sermons are by The Rev. Dr. Gary Klingsporn, Senior Minister of First Congregational Church in Nantucket, Massachusetts. Before moving to Nantucket in January 2010, he previously served for twenty years as Teaching Minister and Minister of Spiritual Formation at Colonial Church in Edina, Minnesota. He has contributed many articles to the www.TheHighCalling.org website and has served as a seminary instructor and writer or editor on a number of publishing projects. He received a Ph.D. in Religious Studies from Baylor University (1985).

One may also consider preaching a series of sermons on the biblical call stories. Although the stories have similarities, each story also bears the uniqueness of each individual's experience in terms of historical circumstances, the task to which God called each person, and their response. Imagine a sermon series starting with the call of Moses and working your way through the Bible into the New Testament stories of Jesus calling the disciples and perhaps the conversion of Paul in Acts.

A. What's Your Purpose? I am suggesting a sermon we might call "What's Your Purpose?" Rather than begin the sermon with the biblical text itself, I often like to begin a sermon with a seemingly unrelated or distantly related story, metaphor, or image that leads inductively to the biblical text. I like to do sermon introductions that prepare the listener to hear the text, but the listener is not initially aware of where the sermon is going.

A good way to begin a sermon on the story of Isaiah's call is to talk about one of our universal human needs—the need for purpose and meaning in our lives. Whether we're young and starting out in life, at mid-life, or in our later years, the need for purpose and meaning always lurks beneath the surface of life. In an affluent consumer culture it's easy to focus on salary, status, and material goals to the neglect of the deeper questions of meaning and significance in our lives. Why are we here? What difference does my life make? What's the meaning of the work I do? How can I do something about the suffering and needs in this world?

Think about opening this sermon with a story that illustrates the question of meaning and purpose. Such stories are not hard to find. Perhaps you have encountered this issue in your own life or in the lives of family members, friends, or acquaintances. Telling such a story could lead to posing the following question for your listeners: "What's your purpose?"

A good example of this kind of opening for the sermon can be found in the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian involved in the resistance movement against Hitler and the Nazis, was arrested and imprisoned in April 1943. From prison thirteen months later he wrote a letter to his close friends, Renate and Eberhard Bethge. In the letter Bonhoeffer speaks of his sadness knowing he will not be able to attend the baptism of the Bethges' newborn son:

"You know that I shall be with you in spirit. It's painful to me, to be sure, that the improbable has happened, and that I shall not be able to celebrate the day with you; but I've quite reconciled myself to it. I believe that nothing that happens to me is meaningless, and that it is good for us all that it should be so, even if it runs counter to our own wishes. As I see it, I'm here for some purpose, and I only hope I may fulfill it. In the light of the great purpose all our privations and disappointments are trivial" (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, Collier Books, Macmillan Publishing 1972, p. 289, letter dated May 9, 1944).

Eleven months after he wrote those words, on April 9, 1945, Bonhoeffer was executed at the age of thirty-nine in Flossenburg Prison Camp. But his words from prison will never be forgotten: "I believe that nothing that happens to me is meaningless As I see it, I am here for some purpose, and I only hope I may fulfill it."

Those words "I am here for a purpose" put before all of us the question for our lives: "What's my purpose?" Introduced by the Bonhoeffer story and quote, this question could become a refrain in the sermon, the recurring question one asks throughout the message. One can state the questions with variations: Why are you here? What's your purpose? What's your calling? To what tasks does God call you?

Having introduced the question that will guide the sermon, one might say something like: "Theologians call this the question of vocation. The word 'vocation' is rooted in the Latin *vocare* meaning 'voice' or 'to call.' Our vocation is our calling. It's the purpose and work God calls us to in the world. It's doing what God calls us to in our home, workplace, community, and church." But it's not always easy to hear that voice. Frederick Buechner describes the challenge and the need to discern our vocation this way:

"Our lives are full of voices calling us in all sorts of directions. Some of them are voices from inside and some of them are voices from outside The world is full of people who seem to have listened to the wrong voice and are now engaged in a life's work in which they find no pleasure or

purpose and who run the risk of suddenly realizing someday that they have spent the only years that they are ever going to get in this world doing something that could not matter less to themselves or to anyone else” (*Secrets in the Dark*, Harper San Francisco 2006, pp. 37-38).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer had a calling. What’s yours? That’s an important question for us to ask and to discern the answer. With that introductory set-up in the sermon, one could then turn to the story of the call of Isaiah and interpret it against the backdrop of the theological theme of calling and vocation.

B. Isaiah’s Story. In the middle portion of the sermon, my suggestion is to retell the story, commenting briefly on some of the details. This accomplishes two things. First, in our culture today, one can no longer assume that all listeners are familiar with the story or with the Bible. Retelling the story enables one to familiarize first-time hearers with the story and to refresh its memory for those already familiar. This is a dramatic and powerful story. Retelling the story and letting it speak for itself is a valuable act of proclamation.

Second, interpreting some parts of the story recreates the setting and helps explain some of the symbols. But in retelling the story, one should keep in mind the ultimate goal of this sermon. The goal is to arrive back at the question for your listeners: What’s your purpose? What’s your calling? That means one must remain disciplined in the retelling and not digress into extended tangents. Such digressions may easily include discussion of details like the symbolism of the throne and the divine robe filling the temple, how “seraphs” were understood, holiness, confession and repentance, or the plural “who will go for *us*” in verse 8. These are important details, some of them to be explored in other sermons on this passage. But discipline and restraint will focus on the point of the sermon, and that is the call: “Who will go?” followed by Isaiah’s response, “Here am I; send me!” (v. 8).

Retelling the story might give special comment to the following four aspects of the story.

1. Setting and Vision: “In the year that King Uzziah died . . . ” (v. 1). Some interpreters emphasize that this was a time of national crisis in Judah. Uzziah had been the king of Judah for fifty-two years. After a long period of strength, prosperity, and peace in Israel, the king was now dead. The powerful enemy of Israel, the Assyrians, were poised to invade Israel. With King Uzziah gone, it was a time of grief, uncertainty, and national crisis. Isaiah carried the weight of the nation in his soul. He entered the temple that day with a heavy heart. While there, he had a vision—an experience of God that was more than words could contain.

The Lord on the throne, high and lifted up, angelic beings singing, “Holy, holy, holy,” and the shaking of the temple foundations all point to Isaiah’s experience of the otherness of God. He was overwhelmed by God’s majesty and glory. It was a transforming moment, a life-changing experience.

2. Isaiah’s Reaction: In awe of God’s holiness, Isaiah was suddenly aware of his own unworthiness to stand in the presence of God (v. 5). “Woe is me . . . ” is the confession of his sin, guilt, and unworthiness to stand before a transcendent and holy God. He also acknowledges the sin of his nation, “a people of unclean lips.”

3. Forgiveness: Touching Isaiah’s lips with the coal from the altar, the angelic being said, “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” It was an act symbolic of God’s cleansing and purifying grace. Forgiven, Isaiah was set free from his sin and unworthiness and was ready for his call. Cleansed by the burning coal, Isaiah was now ready to speak for God.

4. The Call: Isaiah hears the divine call, “Who will go?” He responds, “Here am I; send me!” That day in the temple Isaiah encountered the splendor of God; he realized his own unworthiness; he experienced God’s forgiveness; and he surrendered to God’s call. When people encounter God’s call, these kinds of experiences are often part of their story. Perhaps you can think of examples of this from your own life or from great figures in Christian history. If so, illustrate the point by using those examples.

God sent Isaiah to be a prophet—a preacher, poet and interpreter of the will of God in a time of national crisis. For forty years Isaiah faithfully lived out his calling as God’s person in the land of Judah.

C. Living Your Call. After retelling Isaiah's story one might return to the theme of vocation as a calling that we hear. Isaiah heard God's call in the temple. Moses heard it in the wilderness. Samuel, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Jesus, Peter, and Paul all heard the call. Then one might return to Bonhoeffer by saying, "And Dietrich Bonhoeffer heard the call. He said, 'I'm here for a purpose, and I only hope that I may fulfill it.'"

Eight years before he died Bonhoeffer had written the book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. In it he asked, What does it mean to follow Jesus? What does Jesus call us to do with our lives? Bonhoeffer's answer was that a life of discipleship involves dying to our self, to our own will and desires, and becoming alive to God's purpose and calling for us. The story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is so compelling because he lived what he spoke, and for him the call finally led to a martyr's death.

It's not always easy to live our calling. In the sermon one might comment on verses 9-13 which follow the call story. These verses anticipate the difficult road ahead for Isaiah. The message God gives Isaiah will not lead to repentance, but to the hardening of people's hearts and the ensuing reality of God's judgment. The life of a Hebrew prophet was not an easy life. The message and choices we make in living out our call may also bring misunderstanding, resistance, or rejection from people around us.

Conclusion: Will we go? As the sermon moves toward its conclusion one might bring it back to our everyday lives as ordinary people. Our sense of call might not come from a dramatic vision like Isaiah's. It might happen in the quiet of time away during a vacation or retreat. The call might happen to us while reading a book, during a Bible study discussion, in an experience of worship, or because of something a friend or pastor says to us. It might come from the quiet voice of the Spirit of God whispering within us.

Unlike Isaiah and Bonhoeffer, for most of us God's call is not to some dramatic new life of extraordinary sacrifice. Rather, God's call is to live out our faith in our daily work, families, and community. We are called to serve God through the ordinary lives we live every day. Our calling is to see what we do each day as God's work. Whatever the work—whether it's running a company, shop, restaurant, remodeling a house, being a mom, teaching in a public school, or working as a nurse at the hospital—it's important to see our work as an expression of our faith. In our work we serve God by serving others. That awareness changes the way we do our work and can transform a workplace, family, church, or community.

The sermon could be brought to a close with the simple restatement of the one basic theme: Bonhoeffer said, "I'm here for a purpose, and I only hope I may fulfill it." What's your purpose? Where does God want to send you or use you? To whom and to what tasks will God send you this week to give yourself to others in love? The Voice always says, "Whom shall I send, and who will go?" Can we say, "Here am I; send me"? And will we go?

Connection to Daily Life and Work: God's call of Isaiah invites us to reflect on our calling and vocation. To do so, we need to listen and discern where God is sending us. We need to see what we do each day as God's work. Understanding our daily lives as God's call gives us purpose and meaning, changes the way we do our work, and can transform our workplace, family, church, or community.