

**“Call and Response”
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – February 6, 2022**

**PLEASE READ:
Isaiah 6:1-8
Luke 5:1-11**

I don't know if you read David Brooks' recent article in the *New York Times* on Friday, but he quotes Karen Swallow Prior: “Modernity has peaked,” she said. “The age of the autonomous individual, the age of the narcissistic self, the age of consumerism and moral drift has left us with bitterness and division, a surging mental health crisis and people just being nasty to one another. Millions are looking for something else, some system of belief that is communal, that gives life transcendent meaning. Christianity is a potential answer for that search, and therein lies its hope, and the great possibility of renewing its call.”¹

That quote reminds us that we have a call, and the world is waiting for a response! Both the Isaiah and the Gospel texts draw our attention to the relationship between God's call and our response. They are inseparable. In both passages God's power and gracious call to bring change in individual lives is revealed, but also implicit in God's call is the imperative to share the good news. In both texts we are invited to hear God's call, and to respond.

Isaiah describes his experience of seeing the Lord in splendid and majestic language. The Lord was sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and royal robes filled the temple. The foundations of the temple trembled and shook. Smoke filled the air... The closest you're going to come to this experience is a live concert with the biggest subwoofers ever, laser light show and fog machines, or if you have the unfortunate predicament to be hiking on a mountain when it turns into a volcano!

I don't think many of us would be too confused or ponderous about the Lord's call upon our lives if we had an experience like Isaiah! The fact is, God's call in the here and now typically comes in the form of a more subtle invitation (still small voice). Some of us have had earth-shattering experiences with God and dramatically turn our lives over to God's redemptive purposes, but most of us have come to know God's call with much less drama. I will never forget one of my close friends, who happened to be a salesman for a mining equipment manufacturer, asking me, “I want to commit my life to Christ and his service, but what does selling digitized industrial clutch brakes have to do with glorifying God?”

As we celebrate African American history in the coming weeks, I thought I would share a couple of my favorite quotes from Howard Thurman, an eminent theologian, author, educator, civil rights leader and philosopher. He was a prominent religious figure and played a pivotal role in many social justice organizations and movements of the 20th century. His thoughts, writings and theology of radical non-violence shaped and influenced a generation of civil rights activists, including Martin Luther King Jr.

¹ David Brooks, “The Dissenters Trying to Save Evangelicalism From Itself,” (*The New York Times*, Feb. 4, 2022).

Both quotes are about how to discern God's call on your life. The first is, "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive!" For some reason, too many people think God is calling us to some boring rut of a life, taking away all the fun. I rather like Frederick Buechner's reminder that God's call is where the world's deepest need and your deepest joy intersect!

But it's also not just about you. My second favorite quote by Howard Thurman is: "There are two questions that we have to ask ourselves. The first is 'Where am I going?' and the second is 'Who will go with me?'"

We are called to commit our lives to Christ amidst the mundane and monotonous tasks of daily work and labor, of family relationships and friendships, with struggles of finances, health, or career prospects. Our calling will likely challenge us to deepen the love and commitment we have to those closest to us, our families, and our neighbors, and those who we call enemy...

God has determined to usher in the proclamation of mercy and grace through people just like you and me. Our Lord, you see, has never been so interested in peoples' *natural ability* as in their *divine availability*. God speaks to us in the day-to-day hustle and bustle of our lives.

In our gospel lesson, Luke tells us Jesus was feeling the press of the crowds, so he borrowed a couple of boats on which he could stand and deliver his message about the "good news of the kingdom of God." The first thing that strikes me in this passage is that while Isaiah's vision happens in the temple, here Christ's glory is revealed out in every-day life. This is significant. More often than not, God calls us not in a "religious" moment of worship, but out there when we least expect it... Simon Peter was finishing up work after a hard night's labor, and he let Jesus use his boats. After Jesus finished speaking to the crowds, he suggested to Peter that he throw his fishing nets out in deeper water, and true to form Peter started to argue.

And then a strange thing happens. Peter says, "But at your word I will let down the nets..." And then, before they knew it, the nets were breaking, and the boats were sinking because there was such an enormous catch of fish!

You see, Jesus' mission is to remind us that God comes into our world; into our too often broken and shattered world, where we really are, whether around the kitchen table, the hospital bed, the classroom, the office, or wherever. There is the place we meet God, after early mornings and late nights of labor and struggle with little victory or success. There is the place in which we begin to understand God's love for us when we are broken and tired and afraid and just wanting to find rest. There is the place where our lives are touched by God.

The Hebrew word "teshuvah" is typically translated "repentance." Its root meaning is to *turn*, *return* or *turn around*. According to the Talmud, God created repentance before God created

the physical universe, making it among the first things created.² It can also be translated “to answer.” In other words, repentance is a *response* to God’s loving initiative, an answer to God’s gracious invitation. God calls us beloved children, to live and share the message of salvation for all people. We are awed and amazed. Both Isaiah and Peter, when in the presence of God, fell on their knees, painfully aware of God’s holiness and their own unworthiness. But it is precisely when we are broken before God that God lifts us up and empowers us for life-changing and life-giving service.

How God may be calling you today I do not know... Perhaps God’s call to you is to renew your marriage vows and rekindle the spark of romance; perhaps God is calling you to turn from a pattern or habit which has hindered your peace of mind or disrupted your life; it might be that God is calling you to try again the process of forgiveness and reconciliation with a friend or loved one? Perhaps God is calling you to practice acceptance. Maybe God is calling you to be a transforming presence at the office. Maybe you need to stop struggling with life on your own and enter trusting relationships in the context of a small group or study.

It could be that God is calling you simply to return to worship, and to share your gifts for ministry in this congregation - singing, reading, praying, visiting, counseling, teaching, or reaching out with hospitality to friends who don’t have a church home. I am excited about the potential we have to bless this town, and be a blessing to the world, to partner with other faith communities and talk about tough topics like racism and discrimination in our conversation with Ruby Bridges. But it only happens when we respond to God’s call upon our lives...

You see, we all have the vocation of catching others with the grace and love of Jesus Christ. We are all called to enter into and to expand the reign of God’s love for all people. How we “catch” people with God’s love and grace will look different in every relationship and context. But of one thing I’m sure: When we hear the call, we must respond, “Here I am, send me!”

Here’s the thing: whether it’s the first time or the 1,000th time... repentance involves trust. You’ve heard of the proverbial “leap of faith”? It can be scary...

Ian Cron tells of the time he took his three kids swimming at a lake resort where there were different diving cliffs off some rocks. There was a 20, 30, and a 40-foot cliff. He and his wife had been arguing about whether to let their kids jump. She asked him, “Ian, what’s really going on here?”

“Look, kids get hurt doing crap like this; that’s what’s going on here. 20 feet is a long way to fall,” he said. His wife’s face softened, and she placed her hand on his cheek, “Ian, they’re not falling; they’re jumping.”

² Scherman, Nosson. "An Overview - Day of Atonement and Purity." An Overview. *The Complete ArtScroll Machzor: Yom Kippur*. By Scherman. Trans. Scherman. (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 2008), XIV-XXII.

Ian concluded, “Anne was right. There is a big difference in life between a jump and a fall. A jump is about courage and faith, something the world is in short supply of these days. A fall is, well, a fall...”

They ended up jumping from the 20-foot dive. Then just for fun, they climbed up to the 40-foot cliff to just peer over the edge. That’s like jumping off a four-story building... Well, his oldest 14-year-old daughter just went ahead and jumped. And then as he was yelling that she was grounded until college his 11-year-old daughter jumped. They both burst through the green water, giggling, and shouting, “Come on, dad, jump!” “Not a prayer!” he yelled back... But then the most amazing thing happened... His 8-year-old son looked up at him and said, “Dad, I’ll jump if you jump...”

Peter and the disciples, you will notice, followed Jesus *together*! Sometimes, the leap of faith happens because you know you’re not alone. You are a part of a loving faith community. And when you land, you’ll be greeted with a loving welcome and supportive family... The end of the story is of course that Ian jumped. He said it was so high “that the impact hurt the bottom of my feet. A belly flop from that height would liquefy your internal organs. But it was exhilarating as all get-out. I was twelve again...” And then his son jumped. And his sisters cheered. And his father knew that the boy who had jumped into the water was not the boy who had come out. The old had passed away; behold, all things were new!³

Friends, as we prepare to receive from this table, remember that our world is in desperate need. We are in desperate need! But there is great hope in the renewing of our calling to receive and share God’s self-giving love. So don’t fall, but take the leap to respond in faith and repentance, catching others in the exhilarating, transforming life of the Kingdom of God...

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

³ Ian Cron, *Jesus, My Father, the CIA, and Me...a memoir, sort of* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011), 234-243