

St. Barnabas Episcopal Church
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JUST WHAT IS OUR CALLING?

Our three lessons are all about God calling us to do something for the sake of the world around us. Isaiah has experienced something very dramatic that involved a first hand glance at the Holy One of Israel in the Temple in Jerusalem. He has had some sort of vision of God sitting upon a throne with angelic creatures, called seraphs, calling out “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” Isaiah is overwhelmed, and blurts out: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips.” Then, one of the seraphim from the top of the Ark of the Covenant took a burning coal from the altar and touched his lips. God then says, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Isaiah replied: “Here am I; send me!” The gospel story is placed in a very different setting, but has a similar outcome. Jesus pays a visit to the Sea of Galilee and is pressed by the crowds to preach the word of God to them. He saw two empty fishermen’s boats, and got into one and asked its owner, one Simon bar-Jona, to push out a little ways so that he could sit and teach the crowds on the shore. After he finished speaking, he asked Simon to put out into the deep water and let down their nets. In a skeptical tone Simon explains that they had been fishing all night and had caught nothing. Nevertheless, to respect the visiting teacher (that’s what Master means), he agrees to do as he was asked. Lo and behold, they haul in a tremendous catch. This experience of the glory of God at work in Jesus’ presence caused Simon Peter to fall at Jesus’ knees and say: “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” But, Jesus told Simon Peter and his partners that, henceforth, they would be catching people rather than fish. And, so, they left everything behind, and followed Jesus. Paul is explaining to the Corinthians the nature of his apostleship. He alludes to his own dramatic conversion experience on the road to Damascus, where he dramatically encountered the risen Jesus and was called to become Jesus’ apostle to the Gentiles in order to tell them what God has done in Christ’s death and resurrection. Paul also confesses that he felt unfit to be called such a responsibility.

So, we have here three very different, dramatic stories about encountering the miraculous, mysterious, overwhelming glory of God, three very different men being called to God’s service, and three men feeling profoundly unworthy of such a calling. My friends, in these lessons what is God trying to say to each of us and to St. Barnabas as a congregation on this the day of its annual meeting?

Well, each of the three men—Isaiah, Peter, and Paul—experienced the presence of God in their midst with all of the awe and the trepidation that that brings. Let’s face it: we modern types don’t expect to have such awesome experiences, especially not at

church! Perhaps, we get goose-bumps looking at an extraordinarily beautiful scene in nature or at pictures from the Hubble space telescope. Or perhaps it came at the birth of a child or at some other major life event in our own life or in that of family and friends. For some the awesome event was not a joyous one, but rather a terrifying one such as happens in war or in tragedies such as we have been watching unfold in Haiti or in the serious injury or death of a loved one. They all involve unusual events that break through our ordinary, surface-centered lives, and release raw feelings from the deepest parts of our selves. God meets us there in a powerful way that we don't normally encounter, especially in typical Sunday worship.

So, one of the challenges to us in these passages is the question of whether our expectations of God and ourselves, especially as regards our worship services, are way too tame. One of my favorite authors, Anne Dillard, observed in one of her books that when we go to church we should wear crash helmets, receive life preservers and be lashed to the pews in case God shows up. That's the point: *in case God shows up*. Do we really come here expecting that God will show up? And, if God does show up in all His glory how would we respond? Probably, just as Isaiah, Peter and Paul did—feeling inadequate, realizing that we have not fully given our lives to God. Hopefully, we would be willing to hear what God has to say and to deal with whatever calling emerges from God's appearance.

If truth be told, the mainline churches are declining, because people no longer expect to encounter God in church. An increasing number of people see churches as yet another set of institutions that talk a good game, but don't deliver a whole lot—at least not in terms of making a big difference in the life of the world. Our response so far has primarily been that it is all because we haven't used the right, attractive methods of selling our religion to world around us. If we could just have better programs, better facilities, a more welcoming attitude, and an energetic and popular pastor, then the people will come and all will be well. But, will it?!

For me these lessons suggest two things that I commend to you as you look to the future. The first is that our religious experiences rarely rise above our expectations. Expect little and that's what we normally get. I say normally because God can and sometimes does break through our blasé expectations and cause those awe-inspiring experiences that I described earlier. I also want to say that just because we expect a lot to happen doesn't automatically mean that an awe-inspiring event is going to happen every time we gather. God's Spirit blows where it will, and can never be controlled. But, it is also fair to say that faithful, expectant waiting on God helps prepare us for God's eventual and probably more frequent appearances.

The second thing that needs to be said is that God's glory is not restricted to liturgical gatherings. Yes, that is where Isaiah encountered God's presence. But, it is not where Peter or Paul did. They were both outside. Peter was at work, cleaning his nets on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Paul's experience was on the road to Damascus.

The seraphim were singing that God's glory fills the *whole* earth. Isaiah was commanded to leave the Temple and share God's word with the people of Judah. Peter's miraculous catch of fish led him to leave behind his small world of fishing on the lake to following Jesus around Galilee and eventually far beyond. Paul's blinding experience of the risen Christ led to his becoming the one who would make it possible for the gospel to spread from Israel to all nations. These three men experienced God's glorious presence and were transformed by it. That transformation included within it the calling to go out and share God's plan for all humankind. Sometimes, I wonder whether we church people think that God's main work is within the walls of our churches. The Bible is very clear that what goes on in church is training for God's work in the world. We come to church to be equipped to live Christian lives in our homes, our workplaces and our communities. We don't have to bring God into the world—He's already there. What we do have to do is to bring our knowledge and experience of God with us as we go about our business. Seeing God's hand at work all around us and giving God the glory for it is a major part of our job. The other part is letting others in on this glorious reality. If people can even begin to taste God's presence in their everyday lives, they will want to gather together with fellow Christians to learn and experience more. If we Christians remain holed up in our churches thinking that is the only place we can experience God, then we may be in for a rude awakening as the world passes us by because they don't see that reality. God is calling us to be His instruments in the world. The risen Christ depends upon us to be his arms and legs, his eyes and ears, his heart and mind in the world and all for the sake of the world. What will be our answer? I pray that it will be: "Here we are, God, send us." AMEN.