

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
December 27, 2015  
Dan Anderson  
The Call to Service  
Isaiah 6:1-8**

I know this is the Contemporary service and I'm probably the only one in a suit, but those of you who have seen the movie, think Robert De Niro in *The Intern*. Old School.

I have been granted the privilege of serving wonderful people in three congregations, all of it in Des Moines, and Ridgewood in Minnetonka, and then now here at CPC for the last almost 11 years. And I don't know why I have been given this honor, but I am grateful to God for unmerited favor and grace. Judy and I are grateful to you who have been generous with your affirmations and your kindness over the years. Thank you.

In many ways it will be difficult to leave this calling that I love, and these people that we love, and the inner core of a church that we believe in. On the other hand, I don't think it will be that difficult to step into the next season with Judy and to enjoy the challenges and the opportunities that are before us. We are not moving away, and we look forward to continuing in this church community, in a different role, as members.

Several folks have said something like this to me in the last couple of weeks . . . "The pressure is on. This has got to be your best sermon ever." And I have no pretense that this will be "the best", but what I would like to do is share with you in a personal way that which has motivated my ministry. Perhaps as I share my journey, God will encourage you to step out in response. The text is Isaiah 6:1-8, and the sermon title is *The Call to Service*. Before we move forward, let's pray.

Gracious God, You have always been faithful. One more time, I ask that You will speak and that we will respond to You. Amen.

Some of you know, if you read the most recent *CPC Life*, that I am a third generation pastor. Both of my grandfathers and my father were pastors and I have a small claim to being the only son of Roger and Dottie Anderson who went into the ministry. Roger and Dottie Anderson are my surrogate mom and dad, and for those of you who are visiting, Roger is the founding pastor of this church.

I never knew my mother's parents. Grandpa, Reverend Charles Kegerize, died before I was born, and Grandma, Anna Grace Hess Kegerize, died while I was still very young. But I do, however, remember very well my father's parents, Reverend Charles Francis and Sarah Greeley Anderson. They were good Scottish folk with roots in Aberdeen and Glasgow, Scotland. And I need to apologize to some of my Scandinavian friends here,

because for the last several years I have been telling you that in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Scotland emptied its prisons and its detention centers and deported those reprobates to Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. I need to tell you that this not true . . . it was actually the 13<sup>th</sup> century . . .

Anyway, Nana and Grampy Anderson would often visit, especially around the holidays. Nana had hair that flowed below her waist, though we rarely got to see her long locks; she kept it tight, in a bun on the back of her head. As a couple, they reminded me of Grant Wood's *American Gothic* painting. Can you see it? Some things about my grandparents seemed a bit unusual. During their visits they would get up early in the morning, go into the kitchen, pour a cup of hot water, put a little milk in it and drink it. What was that about!? And then they would retire to the guest room to pray. The rooms in our parsonage were hollow core doors and you could hear everything that passed through. And I could hear, easily, my grandparents as they began to pray: *"We bless You, Jesus. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, we bless Your holy name. There is no one like You. We praise You. We bless You. Holy is Your name. Holy is your name."* And they would go on and on. As a young boy, it all seemed strange to me, the sounds coming from the other side of the door. Much later I learned that they had come to understand something of the holiness of God. Christian faith and Christian service begins with an awareness of the holiness of God.

Isaiah came face-to-face with the holiness of God. In the sixth chapter he records this encounter:

*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD God Almighty; the whole earth is full of His glory." At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. [Isaiah 6:14]*

Isaiah mentions that all this took place in the year of King Uzziah's death. I am not sure that this fact adds anything to the story, other than to mark the time of this incredible experience. Uzziah became king at age 16. He was an egotistical little guy and he decided, contrary to the law of God, that it would be *his* right to go into the temple to offer the sacrifice and the offerings on the altar. This was forbidden for anyone except the priests. He contracted leprosy and that led to his death. It was in the year he died that Isaiah had this encounter where he saw the Lord, high and exalted.

It was during this encounter that Isaiah saw seraphim. I've never seen a seraphim, have you? These celestial creatures were present, and there have been artists who have tried to depict what a seraphim might have looked like, but none of their renderings are helpful to me. How does one describe an indescribable experience? How does one put into words an encounter with the holiness of God? Isaiah saw the holiness of God—

*“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, the whole earth is full of His glory”*—and this powerful event moved him beyond words.

When have you experienced the holiness and majesty of God? For me, it happened in early adulthood on the shores of Bar Harbor, Maine. The sky was incredibly blue, dotted with puffy, white summer clouds. Seagulls drifted on the currents above the sea. An occasional lobster boat came by, stopping to check the pots. As far as I could see, stretched the endless Atlantic. The sea would rise and fall, and swell and fall as it rolled in and then crash powerfully into the rocks. Over and over again the sea would roll in and explode on the shoreline below me. As I looked up and saw the vastness of the sea, the steadiness of the waves continually rolling, and rolling, and exploding on the rocks, I became aware of the awesomeness of God—the power and might of God; God’s majesty, God’s holiness. There were no seraphim. There were no voices, only God’s presence—and I knelt on the shore before our Creator God.

Where have you been overwhelmed by the majesty and the power of God? The awesome beyond-and-above-us presence of God? In the Grand Tetons? On a clear starry night? Hearing the words of Vivaldi’s *Gloria*, or the Messiah wash over you? Holding a baby in your arms for the first time? When have you experienced the majesty and power of God?

Christian faith begins with a glimpse of the holiness of God—this awesome, beyond-and-above-us power of God. The majesty and glory of our Creator, the richness of perfection. And when we gaze upon the holiness of God, something else happens. Before God’s holiness, we begin to see ourselves and we turn away. In the presence of God’s holiness and righteousness, Isaiah cried out, “Woe is me! Woe is me! For I am ruined! I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.” When we see God—really see God—we see ourselves. We see how far we are from perfection. We see the meagerness of our efforts, and like Isaiah, we know that our best deeds are no more than filthy rags. We see our sinfulness and cry out, “Woe is me; for I am a man, I am a woman of unclean lips.”

As I stood on that shore at Bar Harbor, I was overwhelmed by the grandeur of God. Alongside God I saw my own smallness. I felt insignificant. With the Psalmist I could cry out, “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth! When I consider the heavens, the work of Your fingers, the sun, the moon, and the stars that You have created. Who am I? Who. Am. I?”

Some people believe that pastors—the Roger Andersons, the John Crosbys, the Jody Phenows, the James Madsens, the Dan Andersons—some people believe that we are a little closer to God, a little above the common folk. But I can tell you that as much as anyone, we know our insignificance, our failings, our sinfulness, our limitations. Like King David, before the holiness of God we cry out,

*My sin is ever before me. [Psalm 51:3]*

For me the challenge has been the ongoing struggle to see people as God sees them. To sometimes treat others as less-than in the image of God. To hold prejudices, to mock, to look down on, to sometimes see people as objects. My sin is ever before me.

I resonate with The Apostle Paul, who said,

*I am the chief of sinners.* [1 Timothy 1:15]

*I do not understand what I do. What I want to do I don't do, what I don't want to do, I do. What a wretched man I am! Who can deliver me from this cycle of horror?* [Romans 7:15-24]

When we see our brokenness, we know we can never measure up. We can never stand tall alongside a holy God. Psalm 103 wonderfully tells us that God knows our brokenness. God knows we are fragile. And God takes the initiative to redeem broken people.

Isaiah continues to tell of his encounter:

*Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin is atoned for."*  
[Isaiah 6:6-7]

Do you grasp the power of this imagery? Isaiah, who saw himself before a holy God and confessed his brokenness said, "I am a man of unclean lips," and an angel of God came with a coal, touched his lips, and said, "Your guilt is taken away, your sin is atoned for."

Yom Kippur is the Jewish Day of Atonement. It is the only time, the once-a-year time in ancient Israel, when the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies to offer blood sacrifices for the sins of the people. At Yom Kippur, people could again be made right with God and made right with each other. Isaiah did not need to wait for Yom Kippur. Right now, your guilt is taken away; your sin is atoned for.

Like Isaiah, I cannot on my own, we cannot on our own, come close to God. If we are to know and to relate to a God of holiness and majesty, this God of might and power, if we are to be forgiven, we need someone beyond ourselves, someone greater than ourselves to act on our behalf. We need God to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. This is grace. And this grace is seen most completely in the ministry and work of Jesus.

During Advent, we have been remembering that heaven came down in the baby of Bethlehem. GK Chesterton noted that, "The hands that made the sun and the stars were too small to reach the heads of the cattle." Everlasting God stepped into our world to touch the lips of ruined, broken people, to offer grace, and mercy, and forgiveness.

Romans 5 tells it this way:

*You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. [Romans 5:6-8, 10]*

While we were sinners. There is no credit given for growing up in a Pastor's home. It does not matter if we are student leaders, it does not matter if we are leaders in our church, it does not matter if we command attention in wider circles, it does not matter if we learn how to act and how to behave in ways that garner the attention and approval of others. We are all broken and fall short of God.

It was at a youth camp in Winona Lake, Indiana, when this reality came home for me. At the close of one of the evening gatherings, with four thousand high school students in a large auditorium, the speaker gave an invitation to walk to the front to surrender our lives to following Jesus. I was way in the back, with my friend John who I had just met, from Cleveland, Ohio. And Johnny asked me—he leaned over and asked me—if I would walk with him to the front. He was a little too shy to take that step on his own. So we stepped out into the aisle and I did all the right things. I bowed my head as if in prayer, and I put my arm on his shoulder, like I was the more mature, spiritual brother. And we walked to the front. And when we got to the front, an adult came over to Johnny and said, "Come with me." And then another adult came over and spoke to me and I said, "Oh, no! I came with him! . . ." But, Johnny was gone, and I knew that I was as phony as a three-dollar bill. I knew I had been play-acting my whole life. I knew that I was shallow and hollow and hypocritical, and that I needed God's grace and forgiveness, and I surrendered my life to Jesus.

God loved this broken, shallow, hypocritical, snotty-nosed pastor's kid. God forgave me, cleaned me out and welcomed me into the family. "Your sin is atoned for. Your guilt is taken away." It was incredible! I was free! Truly, truly liberated. Truly forgiven!

*Then Isaiah heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And Isaiah said, "Here I am. Send me!" [Isaiah 6:8]*

God did not say to Isaiah, "Now I've got you where I want you. Here's the deal. Serve me or I'm going to tell everybody about your 'unclean lips.'" God did not say, "You owe me, big time, Isaiah, so pay up." God simply asked the question, "Whom shall I send?" And Isaiah said, "Send me."

Our walk of faith, our response of service, begins when we stand before the holiness of God, and in that moment, see the distance created by our sin. When God touches us with grace, forgives us, cleanses us, sets us free, there is nothing we want to do more than to serve this gracious God.

The night that I surrendered my life to Jesus at Winona Lake, my feet never touched the ground. I could hardly believe that God loved despicable me. The next night, on my own, I walked that aisle again. This time I wanted to say, "Whatever You want, wherever You want, God, I'll go. I'll serve You." God did not need to ask. Service is not given out of obligation. Service is a response of gratitude to the one who rescues us.

At the end of that Indiana camp experience, I returned to high school in Connecticut and wrote the obligatory, "What I Did With my Summer Vacation" paper. I wrote how God had changed my life, and every time I capitalized the personal pronoun when referring to Jesus—Him, His, He—my Jewish English teacher struck through the capital letter, docked me points, and lowered my grade, and that sucked a little wind out of my sails.

I would love to tell you that my faith has never wavered, but it has; I would love to tell you that that my commitment to service never waned. I told God I would serve in any capacity except maybe not as a pastor or a missionary. Perhaps as a gifted, affluent businessman serving the church as a wealthy lay person would do. I would love to tell you that from that point of surrender, I have lived a sinless life, but none of that would be true. None of that. I have needed God's forgiveness and God's grace over and over and over and over and over again. And when God says back to me over and over and over again, "Dan, I love you. I know you. I know you are fragile. I know your frame, and I love you still." When God forgives, I want to serve; We want to serve this God of mercy and grace.

Long ago I heard the song *Eternal Life*. The text is from the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi. It has become the prayer of my life:

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace;  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love.  
Where there is injury, pardon.  
Where there is doubt, faith.  
Where there is despair, hope.  
Where there is darkness, light.  
Where there is sadness, joy.  
O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much  
Seek to be consoled, as to console;  
To be understood, as to understand;  
To be loved, as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive,  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
It is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.

A few years ago, Stephan Von Voorst, who was the music director here at the Upper Room, took that prayer and wrote a marvelous inspired song, *Instruments of Peace*. As we sing this together, maybe you will say, Lord, make me, make us, an instrument of Your peace.

[Song is sung]

We serve not out of obligation, but out of gratitude to our gracious God. It all begins with the holiness of God, who touches us in our brokenness, makes us clean, and invites us into service for the King. I can also tell you that it ends with the holiness of God.

Just days before my dad slipped into the presence of his Savior, Judy and I sat by his bed as he drifted in and out of consciousness and cognitive awareness. Suddenly he called out, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty."

We don't know exactly what Dad saw or experienced, but I do know that the Bible concludes, in the Book of Revelation, with a glimpse of heaven that is similar to what Isaiah experienced. There, four celestial creatures call out, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come."

Though sometimes hidden from view by our dark sin, sometimes clouded by the circumstances of life, God's character, God's holiness, God's compassion does not change. God knows us, God loves us, God forgives us, and God invites us to a life of service. Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come! Amen.

May the love of God our Father, who knows you and calls you by name, and the grace of our Lord, Jesus, who offers the wonder of forgiveness and the gift of life eternal, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, who walks with us, comforts us, teaches us, empowers us, may that God walk with you this day and in all the days of your living. Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*