



STEWARDSHIP (VOLUNTEERISM—TITHING YOUR TIME)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection - Isaiah 6:1-8 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) 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. (v. 2) 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. (v. 3) And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." (v. 4) The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. (v. 5) 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!" (v. 6) Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. (v. 7) 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." (v. 8) 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!”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Stewardship is the gift of being held accountable for just, equitable, fiscally and spiritually responsible and loving use of God’s provisions for self and community. Using the elements of prayer, vision, wisdom, dialogue, balance, planning, assessment, division of labor, risk and caution, societal and organizational culture and ethos, Holy Stewardship allows us to transcend desperation, greed, negative sensibilities, callousness, and guilt toward management of human and financial resources, moral capital and community building. We do so because, like Isaiah, the love of God compels us to work with and use these gifts justly. Stewardship emerges from a theology of abundance, not a theology of lack, insufficiency, or greed. Stewardship is celebration, confessional, and liberating. When viewed in this fashion, then we know that we have a responsibility to give of ourselves for the greater good of others and the planet that houses all of us. Yes, many causes, churches, and organizations need money. However, what they often need even more are people who will tithes of their time to have an organizational dream flourish. Whether that organization is a school, a girl-scout troop, a group that builds homes for the poor, assists children with their home-work or brings laughter to sick children, they all need us to step forward and give of our time. Are we answering the call?

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Isaiah 6:1-8

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

There are many call narratives in the Christian tradition and within scripture and in stories of believers. Some stories are ethereal and mysterious. Others involve some physical anomaly such as Paul’s Damascus Road encounter, or a spiritual quickening as in Martin Luther King’s kitchen table experience. Every year, whilst growing up, I looked forward to our Christian Methodist Episcopal Church Annual Conference. Amidst the mountain top experiences of the majestic Holy Communion, the Lay Banquet, Missionary March, and the Youth Talent Night, there was the moment when the bishop read his appointments of where ministers would go the following year. One of the songs I heard intoned each year used a part of Isaiah 6 as its backdrop. The song says, “I’ll go; I’ll go; I’ll go; I’ll go.” That song came back to me as an adult when I was praying about an administrative/professorial appointment at a colloquium and guiding a meditation group. I needed a song to end our session, and I could not think of any song, despite two degrees in music. Finally, I heard and then sang the same song from Annual Conferences long ago: “I’ll go; I’ll go....” If the Lord wants somebody; here am I send me, send me. This song still guides me.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Several Hebrew Bible/Old Testament prophets have powerful visions when they experience God calling them to their vocations. These experiences include a commissioning divine encounter through a messenger or directly, along with a dedicating ritual or symbol. Other than Ezekiel, most of those called protest, and they receive comfort and reassurance from God. With Ezekiel

and Isaiah, it seems they observe God from outside the throne room. At Isaiah's call experience, there were many sights and sounds of jubilation, perhaps even of terror, with the movement of the seraphs. Isaiah dates his vocational experience as the year King Uzziah died (sometime between 742 BCE and 736 BCE), when Judah begins to lose its relative independence and Tiglath-Pileser III ascends to the Assyrian throne, providing a historical dating of the theological revelation of his call experience.¹

Volunteerism, an expression of stewardship, is a major theological theme in this text. The majestic nature of the liturgical drama that unfolds invokes a sense of praise and makes clear the sacredness of God, the moment, and the call to serve. Volunteerism or service is a hallmark of stewardship. Just as Isaiah confessed his trepidation and fear (v. 5), sometimes we may also feel that we are unready, unclean, and unworthy of such responsibility. Just as the seraphs engage a purification ceremony, and God calls out in the heavenly court asking who should be sent, Isaiah hears from a distance and comes forward – we, too, can come forward to volunteer. Some may not view the work of a prophet as volunteerism, but surely it is a call to serve.

Volunteerism puts in action a commitment to libratory, covenantal stewardship, recognizing the reality of human frailties, rage and the inefficacy of entitlement, as it invites us to embrace civility with open hands and open hearts. Being a volunteer allows one to build and positively nurture a relational process that involves an interdependence of actions by board, management, employees, all who have will and spirit. Such a process understands that we engage both God talk and God walk, theology and ethics, within our faith based communities. In such locations, we must question boundaries and limits. Within a covenant that respects these boundaries, both the individual and the organizational ethos must allow for an environment, where we: (1) make and keep promises; (2) respect everyone's dignity, so that we see everyone as sacred; (3) work for the common good of institutional and individual agency, toward the larger social good; and, (4) work with a contextual assumption of business ethics; that is, our behavior is governed by valuing human life and by seeing our freedom to choose in making decisions as the locus of responsibility in justice and love. The goal is one of human flourishing and capacity building.

When Isaiah steps forth to volunteer, to accept his call, he does so without hesitation, but remains aware of his own imperfections. He does not respond with a laundry list of all his other obligations. At the same time, earlier he expressed his uncertainty about his worthiness (v. 5). His uncertainty reminds us there is nothing wrong with asking questions about our sense of call to volunteer. Do we have the credentials, creativity, or sensibilities needed for such a task? Is God calling us to volunteer? Do we have ulterior motives for participating? Is volunteering for this particular ministry at this particular time in the best interest of the larger picture of whom we are and who God created us to be? Engaging in volunteerism is a holy opportunity, to be entered into with prayer and discernment, so that we avail ourselves to God for the equipping for the task. Ultimately, the foundational question is "Who are we and what is God calling us to do?" For further information, please see Parker Palmer's *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, where letting one's life speak means living the life that wants to live inside us, the life which God has embedded inside of us, as gift, not goal.

Celebration

This text teaches us to celebrate the gifts of vocation, recognizing the nobility and sacredness of the call God has on our lives to give service, as a continuation of worship and divine majesty in our daily lives. Embodied stewardship as volunteerism provides us moments where we reflect God's righteousness, justice, love, peace, and compassion to others. Amidst our call, we operate with fairness and moral objectivity, committed to social justice and equity, and joy in humility, as we know the gift of giving.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: The fluttering sounds when the seraphs fly with two wings (v. 2); the seraphs call to each other, praising God saying, "Holy, holy, holy...." (v. 3); Isaiah's confession of woe, his unclean lips, among a community of unclean lips (v. 5); one seraph flies to Isaiah (v. 6); Isaiah hears the voice of God and responds affirmatively (v. 8);

Sights: Isaiah has a close encounter as he saw the Lord sitting (v. 1); seraphs with six wings, two cover their faces, two cover their feet (v. 2); the whole earth full of the Lord's glory (v. 3); amidst unclean realities, Isaiah sees the King, the Lord of hosts (v. 5); the seraph touches Isaiah's mouth with a live coal (vv. 6, 7);

Smells: The house is filled with smoke (v. 4); the odor of live coal from the altar (vv. 6, 7); and

Textures: The velvet-like feel of the hem of the Lord's robe that filled the temple (v. 1).

III. Other Sermonic Comments or Suggestions

An intergenerational project that involves outreach to prisons, soup kitchens, hospitals, and retirement communities is a wonderful opportunity to bring together Bible study, worship, and volunteers.

Note

1. Petersen, David L., Gene M. Tucker, Christopher R. Seitz, Patrick D. Miller, Anthony J. Saldarini, Anthony J. Saldarini, Kathleen M. O'Connor, and Katheryn Pfisterer Darr. The New Interpreter's Bible. Volume VI, Introduction to Prophetic Literature, the Book of Isaiah, the Book of Jeremiah, the Book of Baruch, the Letter of Jeremiah, the Book of Lamentations, the Book of Ezekiel. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001. pp. 101-103