

**"Here I Am, Send Me"
(Isaiah 6:1-8; John 3:1-17)**

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One of the main ways that the Bible encourages us to think about our lives involves what we refer to as a "calling." The basic idea is this: God has chosen and gifted each one of us with a mission or purpose to fulfill and calls us to it. And we have one of many examples of this in this morning's reading from the Old Testament, the "Call of Isaiah."

Typically, in Biblical Call stories the person God calls is confronted by some awe inspiring or intimidating display. (Think of Moses standing before the burning bush). The person God is calling feels inadequate or insufficiently prepared to meet the task God has in mind, and God responds in some reassuring way. What is lacking, God will make up for.

Called to Serve

This Memorial Day weekend is a special time in many ways, because we are honoring the memory of a whole segment of our society who, like Isaiah, heard the words, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" and replied with the fateful words, "Here am I; send me!" We are honoring those who answered the call to serve this country and who lost their lives in its service; for us.

And because so many of the people we are remembering lost their lives at such a young age, I feel that we owe them a special degree of respect and consideration. “Here am I, send me,” are words that require great courage at any age, but they are especially profound when they come from the lips of someone who has not yet had the chance to live a full life.

For those of us who have lived long enough to fully experience what life offers, death does not seem like as great a tragedy to have to face. But when you are young, and all of life lies before you as a wonder yet to be experienced, to have it cut short is a terrible tragedy.

Courage in the Readings

One of the things all of this morning’s readings are about is having the courage to step forward and answer God’s call. In the first reading, Isaiah sees a manifestation of God sitting on a throne, surrounded by six winged Seraphs. The ground shakes as the throne turns and smoke billows forth. It is a terrifying display and Isaiah is intimidated. Whereupon, one of the Seraph touches his tongue with a hot coal, preparing him in advance to fulfill the purpose to which God is about to call him.

Then God says what Isaiah is probably most afraid to hear: “Whom shall I send?” Isaiah is free to make the decision. He can stay quiet or step forward. And he steps forward knowing full well that he is putting his life on the line. Isaiah takes a courageous leap of faith.

I imagine that there are similarities between Isaiah’s experience and the experience of those who went to the mailbox, found a letter from the draft board and suddenly realized that they were being called to put their lives on the line in some far away place.

And even though being drafted was not a matter of choice, that does not diminish the fact that they had the courage to show up, when they were called. And that decision is worthy of our respect.

Nicodemus

A similar call to be courageous and take a leap of faith is embedded in this morning’s Gospel reading. Nicodemus comes in secret to speak with Jesus under the cover of darkness. He comes because he recognizes in Jesus the power of God. He sees that Jesus has an integrity and presence that is somehow absent from his own life.

Nicodemus realizes that even though he is a Pharisee and his whole life

is dedicated to religious observances, he doesn't really understand the driving force behind his occupation. And Jesus tells him that, in order to truly understand, he must be reborn in the Spirit.

So, Nicodemus is also facing a decision. Will he quietly fade back into the night and remain half alive in a life governed by the fear of being discovered for the religious phony that he is? It will be the safe way to go, if he does. He won't have to risk being put on the spot or condemned by his fellow Pharisees for associating with Jesus.

Or... will he give himself over to the movement of a Holy Spirit that will blow his life open in directions that are not of his own choosing, but which promise to bring redemption to his life and bring him the relationship with God that he senses is missing.

Will Nicodemus say, "Here I am, take me?" Or will he resolve to keep quiet and return to the safety of an untested life; to quietly living out a life devoted to hiding his inadequacy and lack of integrity from others?

I leave it to you to decide for yourselves whether the call to sign up and fight our nations wars and the call to serve God should ever be equated with each other. That is a bold claim that each one of us must answer for ourselves as we consider what we are being called to and search our

consciences. As a veteran of the United States Army, I also served to protect the right of citizens of this free country to claim “conscientious objector” status and to refuse to fight. It also takes courage to stand up and say, “This is a war I will not fight.”

And to my mind courage is the virtue that lies at the heart of what we celebrate this weekend. It is the courage with which our forebears put themselves on the line for others and for us. And although the honor belongs to many more, we set aside this holiday weekend to honor the men and women in uniform who have given their lives in this country’s wars.

Honoring the Dead

What is the best way to honor those who have given their lives for us in this way? This weekend some will go to visit gravesites. Others will attend ceremonies. Many will go the beach or to the park, or enjoy a day of general relaxation and say a quiet prayer.

I think that some form of ritual observance or pause to remember and reflect on those who gave their lives is important. But I also think that the best way we can honor those who have stepped forward and said, “take me” is to step forward ourselves and accept the consequences of living up to our own convictions as many of them did.

I can't say what that means for you. Perhaps you have some skill or resource that is badly needed and you will experience some kind of call. Or perhaps there is some injustice in this world that you feel strongly about and you see an opportunity to make a difference and are willing to make the personal sacrifice.

Uvalde, Texas

Perhaps this is where I should comment on what happened last week at the Elementary School in Texas. I don't see how this can be anything but a call to step forward, that is coming loud and clear from God to all of us.

There are very few situations where I feel that I have license to use the words "God says..." with certainty. But I feel certain that I am speaking for God, when I say that the shooting of innocent school children is absolutely unacceptable. It doesn't get any clearer than this. God is not only deeply grieved, but fiercely angered and is saying to us: This has to stop! We have had 288 school shootings this year in our country. The next closest country is Mexico, with 8. Canada, France and Germany together have had 5 and Japan, Italy and Britain have had ZERO.

I don't know where each of you stand on the gun control spectrum, whether you see the mental health of our nation as the problem and not guns, or whether you see the proliferation of guns and easy access as the heart of the problem. I personally think that both views are correct. But what is unquestionable is that the status quo is unacceptable to God. And our willingness to let these things occur without some relevant response reveals our own lack of character and unfitness to honor those who truly gave their lives for us.

I believe that the courage to accept the call to service is foundational and that a culture cannot thrive without people who answer it. And I think that the tendency to hide and move under the cover of darkness, like Nicodemus did, is a huge problem in our country today.

We are far too tolerant of politicians who lie and dissemble, who hide behind secret ballots, take money from special interests and put their own ambitions ahead of the well-being of the people. The crocodile tears of politicians, are waiting for the outrage pass and doing nothing doesn't cut it anymore.

My view is that, if young men and women are willing to die for our sake; then the same standards should apply doubly to those to whom

the high honor of serving in Congress is given. It should be expected that our elected representatives be willing to sacrifice their careers and even their lives, if that is what is necessary in order to serve with honor.

We badly need representatives with integrity and courage today, and by that I don't mean people who are one-sided and are incapable of compromise. We don't need people who ridicule and slander their opponents. That is not strength, nor is it integrity.

What we need is people who are courageous enough to step out of their bubbles and engage with people they don't agree with and find shared solutions. We need people who can control their anger and channel it toward peaceful solutions. That is what real strength is.

But most of all, I think it is up to us to fill the need by setting the example ourselves and answering God's call to serve.

That may seem like quite an intimidating challenge, but I'm sure that God has something in particular in mind for each one of us, and has given each of us unique abilities. Some have a gift for organizing and bringing people together around an issue. Others have a more one to one approach. There are big actions. And there are also a thousand of

small deeds of kindness, that will serve as an answer to God's call.

Perhaps we could send a card to some teachers we know expressing our gratitude for their work and with a prayer for their safety.

And finally, we are not alone. If we have the courage to step forward, God will be with us and use us for good, regardless of how capable or ready we think we are. That is certainly what scripture indicates to us today.