

November 22, 2020 A Willing Servant Isaiah 6:1-8

Beloved in the Lord;

In light of the lockdown in Toronto I am reinstating the pastoral note along with the printed script for the Sunday sermon. It will be my attempt to speak to most of you and share the latest news in light of the second wave of Covid-19. I watch the numbers every day, not only for Ontario, but specifically our area. We remain open for services for one reason: our local area has not had a spike in cases so far. Here are some announcements I want to share with all of you. The Presbytery of Kingston has renewed my annual appointment to serve among you for another year. Presbytery met by Zoom, this past Tuesday and gave its blessing to our continued relationship. We are not planning a Christmas Eve Service this year because we usually have a congregation between 30 % and 50 % larger than “normal” Sunday attendance. It is a safety issue as climate and venues would mean meeting in our sanctuary, where we could not guarantee social distancing. We will be celebrating the Lord’s Supper, God willing, on Dec. 6th, using the bread-juice pods we used in October. I am mentioning that at this point for 2 reasons. The pods do not give us a gluten free option. The wafer is made of flour, water and salt and has next to no taste. If you require a gluten free option, or wish something more like real bread, do not hesitate to bring your own. I would suggest a small piece of bread, or a soda cracker. My prayers are with you all and offered daily. Please stay safe, which means, stay in as much as possible, wash hands or use sanitizer, and of course mask in any

circumstance where you cannot maintain social distancing. We do not catch Covid-19 from places, but from other people. If there is a local outbreak of significance, I will not hesitate to cancel live services. In the meantime, if you are not aware, in addition to the sermon in written form, there is a link on the web page that will give you a video of my reading of the message at the dining room table here at 24 Sherwood Cres. in Belleville. Stay safe. God bless you.

This morning's message in an interim sermon. However it is linked to what I would call my Advent series which will begin next week on the 29th. The overall title for the series this year is, The Servants. Each message will examine an individual or group of people involved in the story of the birth of Jesus, and I hope, provoke meditation on our own status as servants of God and the world around us. The premise is this: not one of these individuals was involved by chance, or luck, or good fortune. Each person in the story of Jesus was chosen for a purpose, in some cases a purpose we do not find it easy to understand, but each was chosen to serve the purposes of God's redeeming grace and love. And what is more, that is not my opinion. It is declared in the Scriptures.

We begin this morning with the prophet Isaiah. The Book of Isaiah dates from 700 years before the birth of Jesus. And Isaiah's career as a prophet spanned the lives of 4 Kings of Israel and he was put to death by Manasseh, son of King Hezekiah, presumably for his messages of coming judgement of God, the Babylonian exile, and ultimate restoration of the

kingdom. Isaiah was a real person. He preached the messages we find in the book that bears his name. And this is really important. He was not a prophet because he chose that career, or studied at the right schools. Preachers like myself delight in this part of Isaiah's story. God called him to serve. God touched his life, changed his life, set him on a course of destiny. And yet having said all that, Isaiah was a willing servant, which brings us to chapter 6 and the verses 1-8.

First let me share with you, I take this portion of Scripture very personally. I have a number of parchments that used to hang on my office walls in the various offices I had in the churches I served. One proclaims that I graduated from Lakehead University with a B.A. in English. One proclaims that I graduated from Knox College with a Masters in Divinity degree. The third one proclaims that I graduated from Fuller Seminary with a Doctor's Degree in Divinity. Which means that I went to the schools and got the papers required to be a candidate for ministry in The Presbyterian Church In Canada. But...huge but...when I was examined by the Presbytery of Peterborough-Lindsay to be licensed to preach the Gospel, (in those days that was the first step toward ordination as a minister) I was asked one thing: "why should we proceed?" My answer was, "unworthy as I am, the Lord has called me to ministry, I have no other reason to be here." I say that as I stand before you. Unworthy as I am, God has called me to minister to you and in this place. And I am tempted to add, because I know my inadequacy, "God help us all!"

Isaiah I am tempted to say, would have made a good Presbyterian minister. There is an extent to which he was minding his own business. It was in the year that King Uzziah died that the ground shifted beneath Isaiah's feet. He received a vision. He saw the Lord high and lifted up, seated on the throne of heaven. He saw the angels fluttering around the throne. And they were calling to one another, their words reminding us of an old beloved and memorable hymn of praise, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty." And Isaiah was stricken. As the vision unfolded, he found himself simply and genuinely in the presence of God.

The experience was so real Isaiah was stricken with terror. Our modern translation says that Isaiah found his voice and what he said is this: "Woe is me. I am ruined." Actually it is more embarrassing than that. The KJV translates the Hebrew as "Woe is me. I am undone." Men will get this perhaps quicker than women. The Oxford Dictionary defines undone in these words: Not done up. Buttons undone. In other words naked and exposed. I am naked before God, Isaiah proclaims. Why? "Because I am a man of unclean lips, dwelling in the midst of a people of unclean lips. And my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty." (Isaiah 6:5) Let me put that in plain talk. I am naked. And I am guilty. And here I am, standing before God Almighty.

Isaiah was not unlearned. He knows what the Scripture teaches. Exodus 33:20. God said to Moses, "no man shall see my face and live." Was Isaiah terrified? Indeed, he

was. He is certain that he is about to be reduced to dust. He has seen God the Almighty and he knows that he, Isaiah, is a sinful man. And that is precisely when God pours HIS grace and HIS love all over the trembling prophet. One of the angels from around the throne takes a coal from the fire, glowing hot, and he flies to Isaiah with the coal in tongs and he touches Isaiah's mouth. And the angel says, "Your sin has been atoned for, your guilt is taken away." And the surprise is, it doesn't hurt. It doesn't burn. It's grace. Forgiveness is given.

And then Isaiah hears God the Almighty, the Holy King of heaven asking a question which it seems no one is going to answer. "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" And while the silence is a matter of seconds, to Isaiah it is deafening. He volunteers. He is like Zacchaeus who is transformed by Jesus choosing to come into his home, "Here and now," he said, "I give half my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, (and he had) I will pay back four times the amount" ...and Jesus said..."Today salvation has come to this house." Isaiah waves his hand in the air. He is frantic to volunteer. "Here I am Lord! Send me!"

Next Sunday we will begin the Advent season. It is inevitable. It will lead us to Christmas. Whether we are in lockdown or not, isolated or not, unable to have soup and sandwiches together or not, it will lead us to Christmas. And as you know, it was Isaiah who would proclaim in his role as prophet of the Most High God, "For to us a child is born, to us a

Son is given...and HE will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:6)

Let us pray;

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, Child born to us, Son given to us, we bow before you offering our worship and our words of praise. Holy God, three in one, one in three, lead us and guide us in the midst of troubling times and bitter waters. Transform us that we might taste Isaiah’s eagerness to volunteer and serve YOU wherever that road leads, and whatever the way of faith may cost. In Jesus name we pray. Amen