

or timidity in those words. We give ourselves to God, exactly as we are. But in the song, the next line is a question. “Is it I, Lord?” Perhaps that change in tone is true to life. At first, we respond boldly. And then, we begin to realize the danger and the unknowns, so we question. Is it really me you want? Maybe I can’t do this as well as I thought? Then, we find our courage again because we place our trust in God. “I will go Lord, if you lead me.” Because this is not the kind of service where we become superheroes. You cannot succeed in serving God by relying on yourself alone; and not even just on each other. We can serve God, we can be disciples of Christ, we can do hard things *because God leads us*. There is no assurance that the journey will be free of danger. But God might just give us a life preserver or a crash helmet as God leads us into faithful service.

Today we are ordaining our youth elder and installing two other elders to active service on our Session, since the three of them couldn’t be here for the ordination service in June. Our long series of ordination questions will be asked of these folks, as always. And we Presbyterians ask and answer questions in lots of situations - parents before a child is baptized, new members when they join the church. Not for every question, but for the really tough ones, we don’t just answer “I will.” We say, “I will, with God’s help.” We rely on God to lead us. God led Isaiah. God led Samuel. Both of them probably would have appreciated a crash helmet, because their tasks of prophecy certainly came with risk and danger. Here at the church, we do our best to ensure there is no danger quite that extreme. But the pandemic has taught us we never really know what’s coming and we can’t possibly plan ahead for every contingency. What we can do is call faithful, strong, courageous people into service and leadership, trusting them to say “Here I am Lord” when the call comes. And then, together, as a whole congregation, we trust God’s guidance. “We will go, Lord, if you lead us.”

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

¹Charles Daw, *Glory to God: A Companion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016)

²Christopher R. Seitz, *Interpretation, Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 54-55.

³Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982) 40-41.



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

August 7, 2022

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost – Favorite Hymns Worship Series

“If You Lead Me”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Isaiah 6:1-8

There is a companion book to the Presbyterian *Glory to God* hymnal that has a little bit of info on each hymn. It also makes suggestions about how to sing the hymns and some background on each one. The author says that singing “Here I Am, Lord” can, in his opinion, be *dangerous*. Can you imagine?! Episcopal priest Carl Daw says this is because the lyrics have us singing in the voice of God. He writes, “Encouraging a congregation to sing either paraphrased or imagined words of God runs the risk of diminishing their awareness that they need to listen for God’s word rather than presume to speak for God.”¹ Well, maybe. The notion that Creator and created humans are very different is classic Reformed theology; it’s important that we remember our place and God’s place and that the two are different. But I bet a bunch of you don’t care much about that theological debate, and you just really love this song, no matter what. Am I right?!

“Here I Am, Lord” is newer in our canon of favorites, but it’s really not that new anymore - in fact the words were published just a few years before I was born, which was a while ago now, - but still the words and melody have a little bit of a contemporary feel. And I think maybe that’s what a lot of us like: the song makes us *feel* in a way lots of things about church don’t always make us speak to our emotions. The words of this song connect us to God, perhaps *because* we are imagining God speaking directly to us. But then, of course, the speaker in the song changes. While God’s words are imagined on each verse - “I the Lord of sea and sky,” - then when we sing the refrain, and the words become our own. We imagine our response to this God who is seeking a servant to bear light into a sinful world. Or better yet, we don’t imagine our response; we actually respond to God as we sing, saying, here I am, Lord; I’ll be the one to serve you. As we sing, this interaction between us and God becomes not just something in our imaginations, but a real dialogue; a real opportunity to rededicate our lives to God.

The song reminds us that our very lives are holy and God has a holy, meaningful purpose for each of us to live out.

The song reflects a little bit on the passage we read from Isaiah. It also ties in elements of the prophet Samuel's call story. Do you remember how Samuel kept hearing his name in the night? And only after it happened over and over, did the priest realize that it was actually *God* calling Samuel's name. That's the repeated line, "I have heard you calling in the night." For Isaiah though, as he encounters God's holiness, he realizes how different he is from God. His life isn't perfect, he doesn't always say the right thing, and surely the people around him speak a lot of untruths and say ugly things, too. That's true for most of our experience, I'd say. But God and the holy creatures do not want Isaiah to be paralyzed by this realization. They would rather have Isaiah empowered to serve God's good purposes. So a seraph, some kind of winged, holy creature takes a coal and touches it to Isaiah's lips in an act of cleansing, healing, purifying. So now, when Isaiah hears God's voice seeking a servant, he is able to respond. As one commentator says, Isaiah "himself steps forward and offers his services, which God accepts without further ado."²

Then immediately, in the verses following, God sends Isaiah out into a task he finds confusing and strange. Certainly not the task he probably thought he was signing up for when he volunteered himself to answer God's call. But isn't it always risky when we agree to serve God? Isn't there a little bit of, dare I say, *danger* involved? If we're serious about being God's servants, then we, too, are likely to be invited to do some things that we don't fully understand. Maybe to lead some projects we don't feel qualified for. Perhaps to speak up on things we assumed other people should be making decisions about. Maybe we'll be asked to give of our time and our money and our energy in ways that we didn't expect. I don't mean to diminish those in the world who, daily, face real, physical danger. And yet I do think that when we're dealing with the awesomeness of God and the building of God's reign on earth, then there are things that feel dangerous that we might be called to do: public speaking, advocating for the least, the lost, the last, and the lonely; giving away a surprising portion of our family's money to church and charity, when the financial planners are always reminding us those dollars sure would help our retirement. Maybe it's not just singing the hymn that's a little bit dangerous; maybe serving

God comes with a little danger and risk, too - ones which we choose to acknowledge and accept.

Serving God is for all children of God, of all ages and abilities. But serving God is *not* child's play. A famous, fabulous quote from the author Annie Dillard captures it best. She writes, "It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us to where we can never return."³ Her words remind us that God has done, is doing, and will do, powerful, amazing things. If we are paying attention, we'll be blown out of the water by them. The Holy Spirit is not just a gentle dove, but also a wild goose, and she is on the loose, creating, healing, stirring the pot, acting with justice, and transforming the world through love. If we want to participate in what that wild Spirit is doing, we've got to be ready. We've got to be willing to walk on the wild side, to sign up for a little danger, to take a few risks.

This past year, the Session - the leadership board of our church - spent time trying to discern our church's Biblical story. We wondered "what story in the Bible speaks to where we are today, to what we're experiencing and how we're living out our faith?" Was it the Exodus story and were we wandering in the wilderness? Were we like the creatures on Noah's ark, casting about in the waves? Were we like the lamp on the lampstand that Jesus spoke of that gives light to the whole room? We struggled to find a story that felt like it spoke to our experience in these strange days and who our church is right now. But finally, we expanded our search not just to scripture, but also to hymns. And we landed on "Here I am, Lord." The words of this song seemed to speak to our experience. The words of God portray the pain of the world and the way that God, in Christ bears those tears and suffering. They show the need for people to respond, for servants of God to step forward, to step up, and step out in faith. They illustrate people putting themselves out there, with vulnerability and courage, in order to serve God. Our elders heard in these lyrics the voice of our congregation saying together, "here we are God. We're listening, we're ready, and we're seeking to serve you above all." Whether or not it's presumptuous or even dangerous for us to sing these words, they are words I feel joyful and proud for us to say.

Isaiah stepped up to serve God boldly. That's what we do when we sing the words of this song, too. Here I am. There's no cowering