

*Holy Moly Wholly* – Isaiah 6:1-8  
(11 Nov 18)

[HAVE FORMS OUT]

“Here I am; send me!” It’s an obvious phrase on a day for making our pledges to contribute to God’s work in this place.

Our focus through this stewardship season has been on Jubilee. Jubilee jumped out as a 50-year debt release celebration pairing with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary for Hope. But not just 50 years. Even more, for proclamation of liberation.

At the MCC, we cherish liberty and justice for all, not with pompous flag-waving, but in a way that honestly seeks to respect all life and to do our part in making it better, rather than infringing on or confining it. That’s the mission we understand from God, and we want to be the kind of people joining in that.

You’ve been preparing to turn in pledges, thinking how you accentuate and assist that mission, to respond, “Here I am!” It’s in the hours you share of time and talents here. It is how you take this mission into the rest of life. And it is in offering your financial devotion.

Besides the great ongoing work here and the 15¢ of every dollar shared as mission support for the larger church and other places joining our liberating labors, I’d like you to know that a basic baseline for next year’s tentative budget involves an increase of 3%. That’s just to keep up with higher water bills and some landscaping and website updates and health care costs and cost of living for your staff, not even to raise in gratitude for their enormous part in carrying this mission.

I’d further like to remind you as you look at your forms that there’s a check box for learning about the Endowment, for estate planning in your will or other gifts. That kind of giving supported the Big Read by purchasing 100 copies of the book so everyone could join in “changing the way the church views racism.”

For one more, a stretch goal we hope to accomplish that will require a bigger growth in giving, I want to tell you about bathrooms. (I don’t usually get to talk about bathrooms in sermons.) We’re looking to redo the downstairs

bathrooms, to make them into separate individual gender-neutral facilities.

I want to offer you a story about why. Recently someone was telling me how going to church has often been scary. One particular difficulty is not knowing which bathroom to use. Whether choosing a men’s room or women’s, this person might get strange looks or even comments about being in the wrong place. That’s not a comfortable conversation, I’d think, especially without knowing how to respond about gender identity. So this person’s Sunday morning solution for years has been to look down into a cereal bowl and realize the milk that has held the frosted mini wheats is the only amount of safe liquid to have that morning, including serving to swallow prescriptions. Certainly a cup of coffee would have to wait.

Avoiding coffee is far from the reality of how most of us need to prepare for church (and I lost track of how much I’ve had so far today). But I can hold that reality and use it in my own preparations for church. It was on my mind as Acacia and I stretched the increase of our financial pledge for 2019. It is part of how we can respond as community to have this be a place of proclaiming God’s liberation, a liberation that can be so simple as to mean that a person can come here and not need to be afraid of something so common and mundane as being able to go to the bathroom.

Now, it would be convenient if I could tell you that God is calling you to do this, calling you contribute as prophetic liberators, standing against oppressive and fearful culture, that God wants you to open your hearts and open your minds and open your wallets for this work, and that since you are faithful, you will respond, “Here I am! Send me!”

But, as usual, it’s not so convenient as that. A nice phrase is that God doesn’t call the equipped but equips the called. But this isn’t even really that.

Last week, Jonah was repeatedly told to go to Nineveh, an equivalent of being sent to Nazi Berlin to proclaim God’s love. But in this Bible passage, God doesn’t choose Isaiah. God doesn’t

direct his mission. God doesn't call him especially. There's nothing that would say Isaiah was special or particularly qualified. He identifies himself as a sinner among sinners, one of unclean lips among a people of unclean lips.

The divine response is to purify him. That is what makes him ready. Then, though uncalled, he responds. This is apparently almost accidental, prophetic vocation and righteousness by association, by proximity, coincidence.

For this stewardship Sunday, I can't tell you the right thing to do is to give more, that God is expecting it of you. All I can do is proclaim again the word of purity, touching your lips with the hot coal that may provoke your response, announcing to you that all your sins are forgiven and your guilt is removed.

Fortunately, that is also why you may be here. It's not quite a smoke-filled temple, not quite the intimidation of majesty with a mere drape of a robe overflowing the space. You're met only by a scruffy bespectacled pastor, not the terrifying angels flitting about. (Sidenote: biblical angels are more scary than pretty. These six-winged beasts called seraphim's name means "burning." It's the same word for poisonous serpents. These are fiery sneaky snaky obscure angels.) For all the difference of trepidation in the story versus sacrilegious me, of a holy, holy, holy vision versus unadorned familiarity of the Blessing Room, you may still come for interaction with divine presence.

And encountering that presence, you may have Isaiah's realization that you fall short, that you aren't very holy, holy, holy, that you don't do all that well, so there could be reasons to fear. Plus you're stuck living in a culture breathing threats with lies and hatred. Being amid a people of unclean lips may even sadly be church culture of gossip in small circles, or meetings where we get worked up and fail to speak as kindly or hopefully as we should.

The reading is similarly situated amid a specific religious and political landscape, in Jerusalem at a transition of power, from King Uzziah. It's not a time when things are going all

that well. God's people are a mess, rebelling against what God would want. The book of Isaiah begins, "Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who are utterly estranged!" (1:4) Not the best heart-warming description.

Facing such rotten times, there may be a reaction of wanting to hunker down, just to find a pleasant diversion, to try to forget about it all, certainly to hide from the danger, much less to be wary of divine parental discipline. But in those ancient hard times, when rulers could be no good and culture was corrupt, something inspired God's prophets to step forward. God's work needed to be done, was begging to be done. And some unusual suspects got swept up into it.

So like Isaiah, here you are, amid a surprising encounter with the divine, transforming you and your place in culture. As you look to our world, to what still needs to be improved, to the work to come, your lips are touched, are cleansed, unsealed—not so you can tout your own plans or accomplishments, not to turn to celebrating the victories of our side, but to proclaim God's glory of liberation, from a God who fills creation, a God more mighty than we can possibly envision, but who abounds in steadfast love and loves to hang out with sinners and failures, in a vulgar culture and here in unholy hypocritical religious circles, and coming into your daily regular unspecial life.

So I can't tell you that this God expects you to take another look at your pledge sheets, to reconsider, to leap up with a grand "Here I am" readiness to do more of your part. In fact, this God probably has reason to expect the opposite. But the work needs to be done, if nothing else so that everyone can safely and comfortably go to the bathroom. That's part of God's mission.

Even if you don't have some eagerness or special thing to contribute, if you just happen to be in this holy place around this holy conversation, still God loves you and reaches out to forgive you and purify you. You are made holy, not because you deserve it, whether you ask for it or not, and even though you may not know what

to do with it. Simply since here God's word  
proclaims liberation.