

“Here I Am” / Isaiah 6:1-8 / 3 February 2013

Have you ever been busily scurrying through life, going about the routine business of your days when you paused...looked around and asked yourself, “Why am I doing this?” Has that ever happened to you? Maybe you were on your way to yet another evening meeting, or logging onto the Internet, or writing the annual Christmas letter, when an odd little question popped into your head: “Wait a minute! Why do I do this again? Why do I log onto Facebook and read about what my old high school lab partner is having for dinner, or how her child just lost his first tooth? Why do I do it?” Have you ever found yourself standing in front of the opened refrigerator thinking to yourself, “Hey, wait a minute. I’m not even hungry. Not really. Why do I do it?”

Sometimes we don’t know quite *why* we do the things we do. Even some of our biggest undertakings aren’t very thoroughly thought out. From time to time, I wonder why I’m still doing homework at my age. And, well, let me ask you this: Why do you come to church? Have you ever asked yourself that? When most of your neighbors choose to stay home with the Sunday paper and a second cup of coffee, what pulls you away from your home, through the snow, to this place? You could be washing the salt off your car, or catching up on emails, or putting your DVDs in alphabetical order. When a new day peeks over the horizon, a long, free Sunday full of potential and promise, full of all manner of possibilities, why church?

I mean, think about it. Someone visits Bower Hill Church and decides that they like it. Maybe they find the worship meaningful, or their kids enjoy the Sunday school. There are lots of other children running around. As a bonus, each kids gets an occasional opportunity to stump the pastor by putting something really tough into the children’s sermon basket, a racecar, a Q-tip, piece of technological gadgetry that the pastor doesn’t even recognize. Bower Hill is a good place for families with small children, but many people here don’t have small children, and it’s a good place for them, too. The adult education opportunities are top notch, real NPR quality. Besides, it’s a friendly place. Well, at first the newcomer is encouraged to come to special events, game nights, Lenten dinners, comedy nights, picnics. Then, in time, the newcomer is asked to usher or serve on a committee. Then in a year or two, they’re asked to serve on Session as well as chair a committee. And by the way, we’d really like it if you played an instrument in our worship services—preferably one that you haven’t practiced since high school. They came in the first place because they liked the worship service, but by the time they’ve been here three years, they’re missing the worship service altogether because they’re teaching Sunday school, or setting up for coffee hour, or spending the weekend down in Haiti fording muddy rivers on foot and having nightmares caused by anti-malarial pills.

Why church, when it ends up being so much more than most of us bargained for? Why church, when it turns out to be more than an hour on Sunday mornings; it ends up being an all-consuming way of life! Why church? There are as many answers to that question as there are people in the pews today. The answers are complicated. They go far and deep. Let me tell you about one man who probably went to church to escape the turmoil of his times: Isaiah. We just read a little part of his story. Isaiah lives in deeply troubled days. His small country is sandwiched between large and warlike neighbors. Any time of day, any day of the year, you might glance up to see a dark cloud of foreign invaders on the horizon, marching toward you, coming to kill, destroy, and plunder. You and I live with the threat of terrorism and ecological disaster, but very few times in

history have been without their looming fears, and Isaiah's were probably worse than our own. Isaiah, just a regular Jewish man, devout and humble, ducks into the temple quietly to meditate, to find refuge from the grinding anxiety of his times. Isaiah sneaks into the church for asylum. He just ducks in a little side door and slips up a side aisle, surrounded by the magnificent beauty of the temple courts.

Once inside the holy place, rapt in prayer, and encircled by the sacred hush of the half-lit sanctuary, something new happens to Isaiah. As he whispers his many troubles in heartfelt prayer, he starts to feel those worries lifting away from him, like the lifting of a burden. And in a new state of ease and relief, there's a newfound sense of safety; he feels like a small baby, known and loved, cradled in God's powerful and protecting presence. And that sense of smallness and wellbeing fills Isaiah with a kind of wonder, and that wonder leads to an overwhelming awareness of his own connectedness to God. His arms grow light; his spine even tingles with visionary joy. It's as if Isaiah sees the great marble pillars of the temple shaking with God's nearness. He sees the holy place rocking and spinning. He thinks he can almost hear the angels singing. And they're saying, "Holy! Holy! Holy! Heaven and earth are filled with God's glory." And then it's as if he hears the very voice of God, saying, "Who can be my prophet? Whom shall I send?" Isaiah, crouching in the side aisle of the sanctuary, both spellbound and a little scared, speaks up, "Here I am. Send me. I'm right here. There's nobody else. Why don't you send me?"

Now, I'm thinking that more people would come to church if they had powerful, life changing visions like the one Isaiah had. Or, I don't know, maybe those visions would scare people away. But look what happened to that poor guy. He goes sneaking quietly into the church to escape from the world and its troubles, and by the time he picks himself up off the floor to go home, he's a prophet, newly appointed to go and throw himself—all his life's energies and passions—into the very troubles of the world that he had come there to escape. And that's how it always works! We come to church for a variety of reasons. Sometimes it's because we have friends here. Sometimes we come out of habit, or because we like to sing, or because our life needs a place of refuge and safety. Sometimes we don't even know exactly why. We come looking for one personal thing or another, and if church is doing its job, then we leave with a new calling to go out and throw ourselves into the life of the world. For everyone who finds his or her way through these doors for whatever reason leaves here with a new responsibility laid upon his or her shoulders. "Whom shall I send," the voice asks, "And who will go for us?"

Most of us come at life—and church—with firm expectations. I read a story recently about a gas station way out on a very rural road between two far-flung towns, in the days before the interstate highway system. One traveler stopped at the isolated gas station, and as he was paying for his gas, he asked, "So it's another forty miles to the next town. What's that place like?" The attendant said, "Well, what was the last town like?" The traveler said, "It was an awful place. The people were cold, unfriendly, and superior. They had no time for a stranger." And the attendant said, "I'm sorry to say, you'll find that the next town is exactly the same." A few days later, another traveler stopped to buy gas at the remote gas station, headed the same direction as the first, and he asked, "So, I see it's forty miles to the next town. What kind of place is that?" And the attendant said, "Well, what kind of place was the last town you came through?" The traveler answered, "It was a wonderful place. The people were warm, and friendly, and down-to-earth." And the attendant said, "I'm happy to report, you'll find that the next town is exactly the

same.” And it’s true. We come at things—and at people—not with openness, but with expectations. We come at church, too, with expectations, and they always shape, and limit, our experience.

And so, I ask you again, why do you come to church? What are your expectations when you come here? Twenty-three years ago, as a college student, I used to slip into a little side pew that was partly behind a pillar, on a side aisle in the big, gothic sanctuary of First Presbyterian Church in Oklahoma City. The sanctuary was enormous, and there was never any risk that my seat would be taken. I always sat right beneath a small stained glass window that showed Lazarus bursting from the tomb, dressed like a mummy. Nobody else ever sat there because, from that seat, you had to crane your neck to see the preacher. But I wasn’t necessarily there to *see* the preacher. Lord knows, I wasn’t convinced of anything he was saying. I always slipped in right as the service was starting, and I always left just the second the choir sang the last “Amen,” because I didn’t want anybody to talk to me. I didn’t want anyone to notice me, or ask me who I was, or encourage me to fill out a visitor’s card to drop it in the offering plate. And yet, I came back week after week to sit in the same pew, to let those words wash over me. The words of Scripture, and Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the sermons. That was what I needed from church at that time in my life; I needed its poetry, its sacred words. And in time, those words began to work their wonders in my spirit. And after a long time of just listening, well, like Isaiah, I ended up having my own vision—of sorts—and my own calling, though it took years to develop. And now, instead of listening from behind a pillar, I speak from a pulpit.

I still don’t know exactly why I went to church back in those days. My experience of church as a child wasn’t altogether positive, and I was not a believer in the standard sense. What matters is that, eventually, my going there changed my life, gave me a new vision, gave me a new understanding of myself and my place in the world, gave me a mission to the world outside the church, a calling I didn’t expect. Whatever your reason for making your way to church week after week, I encourage you to be open to a new experience of God here. Be open to the things that God might be whispering to you, the new visions that might be in store. Open your ears to that strange voice, which still asks—of those who will hear it—“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” There’s really only one answer to a question like that, and there’s really only one person who can answer it, just as there is really only one person who is uniquely placed in the time, and the place, in the relationships, with the abilities that are solely yours. For you, too, have a calling. It’s probably nothing like mine, but it does begin here, and then it extends out into the workaday world you inhabit. Come to church seeking whatever it is that you seek, but be ready to have your life interrupted. Be ready to be changed by having been here, singled out, commissioned, and sent out into the world in a whole new way. Isaiah went to church to escape his troubles, and he left with a whole new calling to go and face them. Be ready to say, “Here I am, send me.” Amen.