HOW WILL YOU RESPOND?

Three men died and went to the entrance into heaven. The first man said Peter, “I was a preacher of the gospel, serving faithfully for fifty years. Peter told him to step aside for a moment. The second man said, “I was also a minister of the gospel; I served my church faithfully for forty years.” Peter also had him step aside. The third man said, “I was not a minister, just a government worker with the IRS for six months.” Peter told him to go right in. The first minister objected. “Why does he get to go in before two ministers?” Peter said, “The truth is, in six months the IRS agent scared the devil out of more people than either of you did in a lifetime!”

We all have a calling. For some it takes the form of ordination. Others find their calling in everyday life. People are called to all manner of work, and for a few who have figured out how faith integrates with occupation they see the two hand in hand. God equips and enables us to be productive, to be fruitful in the world. We were created to participate in God’s good work.

We’ll be hearing more about work next month. First, we must finish up with our dangerous prayers. The last one has been called a prayer of availability. Within our own private or public lives, we tend to determine for ourselves how available we want to be to others. I know folks who have a hard time saying no to any request, but then there are those who have no trouble with, “I don’t think so, thanks.”

I fall somewhere in the middle, as I’m sure most of you do. Saying no to God is different. When God is doing the asking we know He’s already aware of any excuse we make, and so we struggle to find a good reason to say no. Even then it is surprisingly easy for some to turn God down.

Scripture is filled with stories of God’s call on individuals, not all of them willing. Three responses will be our focus today, the first from the prophet Jonah. Now Jonah had great success as a prophet once he agreed to speak for God, but he had to learn a lesson to get there. Long story short, when God called him to go to Nineveh and preach against it, Jonah went in the opposite direction.

He wound up in a storm at sea, was willingly thrown overboard, swallowed by a great fish and spent three days feeling sorry. When given another chance, he went, but begrudgingly. He was never happy, even when his short sermon worked and all of Nineveh repented. Jonah’s response was, “Here I am, I’m not going!”

How many times have you felt God’s prompting to do something on the spur of the moment, like call someone whose name popped into your head? Maybe you’ve been driving and you suddenly feel you’re supposed to go down a certain street or stop at a certain business? I’ve answered those calls and found that God was asking me to help someone. The feeling is incredible and humbling.

Opportunities missed are opportunities lost, as they say. That doesn’t mean God will stop calling, however. Sometimes He knows we need time to act, even if our hesitation means He asks someone else. That’s exactly the nature of our second response in scripture. We all know the story of the burning bush, the extreme manner of God’s calling out to Moses.

Moses was curious so he went closer and God told him to take off his sandals because he was in a holy place. When God told Moses what work He had for him to do, Moses asked some initial questions, like who was he to do such an awesome task as free the slaves, and who was he supposed to say had sent him. God’s answers were powerful and impressive, all about His great plans for Israel.

Then Moses started to waver, even after God showed Him the strength that would be with him. Moses complained about his poor speech, and God insisted that He would be there giving Moses the ability to speak well. Moses’ reply was, *“Oh God, please send someone else.”* Now I guarantee you that every pastor has at one time or another snickered at that verse. Sometimes they joke about it at appointment time.

It wasn’t going to deter God’s plan, though. Moses was given his brother Aaron as a spokesman and he would handle the rest. As it turned out Moses had one of those lifelong callings like the preachers who went to heaven. We never know what our journey will be like but we can trust in what God is sending us to do.

Response number three is quite different from the first two. The prophet Isaiah’s story is told in one of the largest volumes in the Bible, a powerful book of prophecy closely tied to the New Testament. Imagine if Isaiah had said no. The way we understand Jesus would be changed.

Jonah said, *“I’m not going.”* Moses said, *“Send someone else.”* Isaiah acted responsibly but for a very good reason. Unlike most books where the call occurs at the beginning of the account, Isaiah’s first five chapters deal with visions of the sorry state of Judah. Not until chapter six do we see what caused the great prophet to concede to God’s request.

Isaiah was given a vision of God’s glory filling the temple, surrounded by angels calling out, *“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory!”* Then the temple shook and smoke filled the place. Isaiah cried out for his desperate state, a man of unclean lips in a world of people of unclean lips. He had witnessed God, and now he was certainly doomed.

An angel flew to him with a burning coal and touched his lips to remove his guilt and cleanse his sinfulness. In the next moment, God’s voice called out, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Swept up in emotional thankfulness, Isaiah replied, *“Here I am! Send me.”*  That’s dangerous prayer number three.

How do we get to the point of praying this dangerous prayer? What causes our total surrender to God? First, we need to have an experience of God that is beyond anything we’ve ever known of Him before. We need to see Him “high and lifted up,” to feel His presence in a profound way. Now that might happen in a hospital room or a sanctuary. It may take the form of a dream or vision or it could look like the face of someone you love.

Typically, we don’t see all of God because we’re not looking. We haven’t let ourselves be vulnerable before Him. As James said, we don’t have because we don’t ask. The second thing we need is to be truly aware of who we are before God. Isaiah’s first thought was of his sinfulness and being immersed in a world of sinfulness. Seeing God in comparison to that was too much for him to handle.

It’s a terrible thing to think too highly of ourselves, but it’s worse not to recognize our failures, our faults, our vulnerability. God already has the details, He’s just waiting for us to make them known to ourselves. Forgiveness can’t be offered if it’s not requested, which ties into the third experience we need to become completely God’s possession.

We need to understand the grace that we sing about, that we claim as the way we are saved. Grace is not just a concept, it is a state of being. Condemnation has been eliminated once we accept Christ’s offer. Isaiah was immediately provided with cleansing and freedom from guilt. The touch of God’s refining fire was the catalyst for his willingness to say, *“Here I am! Send me!”*

Send me. Scarier words were never spoken. The one realization that bothered me the most when I agreed to pursue full-time ministry was that I would have to study Greek in seminary. Never mind the fact I had only an associate degree and would first have to complete a bachelor’s program! It wasn’t the preaching or pastoring that frightened me, it was the language requirement. As it turned out, I loved Hebrew, but Greek literally remained Greek to me.

Even before I left for seminary I had to complete a series of requirements and tests for the candidacy process. I was already serving in three churches, preaching weekly, leading groups and doing everything a clergy person does. My first real snag came when I became overwhelmed by the enormous paperwork. Little did I know there would be much more to follow, not to mention graduate degree requirements.

I had great mentors and friends who prayed me through it. Two years later I was leaving for Kentucky, going back to school for the third time in ten years. I thought everything was ironed out for my education, but when I arrived at school I hit another snag. The amount of private funding I was set to receive was somehow miscalculated and I would only have half of what I needed per year.

Thinking I would have to quit before I started, I went looking for work and was hired at the first place I applied, a few blocks from campus. Four years later, I had some great experiences, saw several states and learned as much theology as you can cram into a nearly 40-year-old brain. I returned to the Dakotas, began my first official appointment and hit another snag, which tested my ability to speak up for myself.

Along the way to the present day I have faced discrimination, apathy, church decline, and way too many funerals. Not everything I know today came by way of seminary. Most of it came through much trial and error. No journey into ministry is completely smooth, but there’s always something gained.

What I can tell you about this call is that not all ministries are careers. Not all the work of God is salaried. The work of the laity is a biblical truth. The priesthood of believers is not just a suggestion. Jesus called the most random and ordinary people He could have assembled, including women, which was unthinkable then. Some think it still is!

The New Testament is clear, even listing the gifts of the Spirit and the roles of those who follow Christ. The church is the body of Christ, and when a body stops functioning properly, it dies. We owe it to God to remain very much alive.

Not all of us are called to full-time ministry, but all of us are called. Our UMC Book of Discipline states, “The ministry of the laity flows from a commitment to Christ’s outreaching love. The witness of the laity; their Christ-like examples of everyday living as well as the sharing of their own faith experiences of the gospel, is the primary evangelistic ministry through which all people will come to know Christ and the UMC will fulfill its mission.”

Ministry doesn’t have to happen within the walls of the church; it’s better if it doesn’t. Churches put people off; they are suspicious of what goes on here, they fear judgment, they don’t speak “churchese,” they’re skeptical. Once people outside the church experience church people outside the church, then they can begin to see the appeal of being in the church.

We live in a time where churches are dying slow, painful deaths, and we have the beautiful monuments to prove it. Our big church buildings served a great purpose when it was the norm to attend church regularly, but now regular attendance is defined as once a month.

So, what happens to that church connection the other three or four Sundays? Families, couples, and individuals miss that opportunity for fellowship, for spiritual growth and being in community with fellow believers. People outside the church miss the chance to be invited to church. They miss learning by example by observing the joy of their Christian coworker.

Those who need us miss our opportunity to give or to help. Ministry is not just what happens on Sunday. Ministry is our way of life, only we haven’t realized it yet. So, our dangerous prayer isn’t really all that dangerous, but it is risky. If you pray it sincerely you may risk finding more of God as you lose more of yourself to make room for Him.

You may risk discovering the freedom obedience brings. Surprise, it’s not the burden Pharisees made it out to be. We live by the grace of God, we walk by faith in Christ, we serve by the power of the Spirit. None of those things started with us.

In closing I’ll share the words of Oswald Chambers, “Remove the thought from your mind of expecting God to come to force you or to plead with you. when our Lord called His disciples, He did it without irresistible pressure from the outside. The quiet, yet passionate, insistence of His ‘Follow me’ was spoke to men whose every sense was receptive. If we will allow the Holy Spirit to bring us face to face with God, we too will hear what Isaiah heard – ‘the voice of the Lord.’ In perfect freedom, we too will say, ‘Here I am! Send me.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. Chambers, Oswald, *My Utmost for His Highest*, January 14 entry [↑](#footnote-ref-1)