

“Consecrated for Love”
[A message in three parts]

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Epiphany, Sunday, February 10, 2019
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Holy Scriptures: Isaiah 6: 1-8 Luke 5: 1-11

Isaiah 6: 1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ² Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³ And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

⁴ The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵ And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

⁶ Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷ The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.”

⁸ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

Luke 5:1-11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, ² he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³ He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. ⁴ When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” ⁵ Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” ⁶ When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. ⁷ So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸ But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” ⁹ For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; ¹⁰ and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” ¹¹ When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Sermon

PART ONE

Consecrated for Love

To be consecrated is to be set apart or dedicated to the service of God.
Abraham Lincoln spoke at the dedication of the Gettysburg National Cemetery,
In his address Lincoln said,
*“In a larger sense, we cannot dedicate,
we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground.
The brave men, living and dead,
who struggled here have consecrated it,
far above our poor power to add or detract.”*

God has consecrated you, far above our poor power to add or detract.
Before you were born, you were declared an object of veneration and honor.

God has dedicated you, devoted you, delivered you
for a life of service and discipleship, of love and compassion.
This is not something for which you have a choice!

When folks recognize that God is calling, beckoning, willing for us
to serve together,
to strive to embody divine love and compassion,
to put into action the love we are to have deep inside
for our neighbors and ourselves,
sometimes a whole bunch of us, including me,
initially get confused, or distracted, or reluctant.

The Holy Scriptures are replete
with faith stories, testimonials, testaments of experiences of the holy.
Often the stories begin with a call to follow God,
and just as often there is great reluctance to say yes.
How many of us have thought, *“I know you called me, Lord,
but I have so many great excuses why I have to say no.”*

Consecrated for Love? I don't think so.

Moses said that he was not good at public speaking.
Gideon said that he was the least in his family.
Jonah, told by God to go to Ninevah, instead fled toward Tarshish by land and sea.
Martin Luther King, Jr., confessed that he was weary and leery.
When Simon Peter witnessed the amazing power of God,
and that God wanted to use him,
he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying,
“Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”
This is the same Simon Peter whom Jesus called Rock,
and on whom He built the Church,
a Church for saints and sinners, a hospital for healing and mercy.
When the Angel Gabriel called on Mother Mary, she wondered, “How can this be?”

And Sarah? Asked to start a family at her age?
Well, Sarah simply laughed.

The Prophet Jeremiah was no different.
The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah when he was quite young.
The Lord said,

*“Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you,
and before you were born, I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”*

Jeremiah immediately lodged a protest, telling God,
“I don’t know what to say, because I am only a youth.”

Isaiah protested as well, saying, *“I am a man of unclean lips.”*
As Isaiah tells us his story in his own words, we get to overhear the Gospel.

⁶ *Then one of the seraphs flew to me,
holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs.*

⁷ *The seraph touched my mouth with it and said:
“Now that this has touched your lips,
your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.”*

⁸ *Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying,
“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”*

And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

Consecrated for Love

God calls and we respond.

Pure and simple.

The Lord says, *“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”*

WHO will go for us?

Who will go for US?

The collective WE has a need of at least one soul to say yes.

WE need someone to respond!

We overhear the singular One True God, the Great I AM

bringing into the conversation the community

of the Holy Trinity – the Creator, Son and Holy Spirit,

all the while including in the pondering

the collective need of the commonwealth of humanity and creation.

The Trinity wonders aloud, pondering, letting us in on the Holy Thought Process.

Hmmmm, whom shall I send, indeed.

Hmmmm, considering the particulars of this need,

shall I call you or you, you or you?

The selection process, however, is only halfway done.

A call without a response is a dead end, a lost cause,

an unnecessary delay when every second and every life matters.

Lord knows that somebody, somebody, somebody, you see,

needs to step up and step in, step out and step forward.

Who will go for us?

Don't be shy!

This is not a time to pretend you don't know what is going on
or to feign unworthiness

or to put your light under a bushel.

No one says you have to be perfect, or all finished, or all set to go.

Have you ever noticed that perfection

is not on the Follower of God Job Description?

A blameless, spotless past is not on the job description.

A resume chock full of degrees and work experience

and a glowing report from your kindergarten teacher
are not on the job description.

The only qualification is knowing that you don't meet the qualifications.

And that is alright.

God never, ever asks for our abilities.

God simply requires our availability.

We might think that if we exclaim like Isaiah did, *'Woe is me! I am lost!'*

that that may absolve us from being called to minister in Jesus' name,
that we get a bye, an out, a pass, an excused absence,
an honorable discharge from service above self.

As they say in New York, *"Fuggedaboutit."*

By the grace of God you are **Consecrated for Love.**

Like Isaiah, our unclean lips,

the fact that we live among a people of unclean lips,

means only that we need to humble our self, stop behaving badly,
start belonging beautifully and brush our teeth.

Believe me, Isaiah is not being modest; he is being honest.

Some people receive their call in a flash of lightening,

witness a burning bush that is not consumed,
hear a voice from the heavens

or experience a glorious dawn the breaks through the darkness
bringing light and revelation.

There are as many different ways that God calls us

to fully, joyfully, gratefully live out divine love and compassion
as there are souls on this blue planet spinning in the sky.

And no two are alike.

You are unique in all the world.

You are **Consecrated for Love.**

PART TWO

Consecrated for Love

My call to a life of discipleship was subtle at first,
having its genesis when I was 5 years old.
My baby sister Carol Marie Calvert died of SID, aka, “crib death.”
My parents patiently articulated the faith that she lives forever in heaven,
that we miss Carol dearly, yet we know where she is.
As a child then a teenager and on into adulthood
I frequently found myself calmly, gently comforting my friends,
articulating the faith about life and life everlasting.
Being a comforter and a non-anxious presence evolved into a vocation,
a call gradually and slowly over time becoming clearer,
a call has remained constant and sure with each passing day.

My own call took a giant leap forward at age 23,
the revelation happening on the first day back in class in September 1983,
right after summer break from seminary.
Like other seminary students, I had a church internship.
Back in June an Episcopal priest hired me
to help with a Vacation Bible School in Elizabeth NJ.
Sure, I said.
You will need to plan a daily worship service for the kids, he said.
Sure, I said.
You will need to preach every day, he said.
Come again? I don’t preach, I said. I’m going to be a community organizer.
No, you are going to preach every day in worship during VBS.
So, I did as he commanded, and somehow survived.
The sermons were mediocre at best...but we had fun in the process.

When classes resumed in September,
I found myself in a room with seminarians processing our summer internships.
A young woman next to me said she preached one Sunday,
but only started to prepare her sermon the night before.
A new voice in the back of my head said,
*“James, you preached this summer,
and I started to prepare you before you were born.”*
The hairs on the back of my neck stood up.
I intuitively knew it was the Voice of God.
I started to take preaching seriously,
adding extra homiletics and biblical exegesis courses.
Within six months I fully and unconditionally accepted God’s call
to be a local church pastor—it just felt right, like trying on a good suit.
34 years later, here I stand in this significant pulpit before you,
delighted that the spark within still glows bright.

PART THREE

Consecrated for Love

You know, the Voice of God that spoke to me in the middle of class
did not require a decision.
God simply affirmed, then confirmed, then transformed my life and vocation.
I was free, freed by the Word of God;
Delivered from a fear of speaking aloud to more than one friend at a time
my hope and love for Jesus Christ;
unchained from thinking there is only works and not words;
released from holding on to false images of perfection,
liberated to be authentic and real and faithful.

Observe that this passage in Isaiah is about a call from God
that requires neither perfection nor fearlessness nor bravado.
God demands faithfulness. Trust. Dependence.
As a matter of fact, after Isaiah's sinful mouth is seared,
his wayward will becomes bent toward the Way of God.
He hears the call for a servant, he steps forward, he says, "*Here I am! Send me!*"
Yes, there was opposition to the word and works he delivered.
Yes, there will be opposition to you and your call, as well.
Yes, there are consequences for bringing forth God's desire for repentance and renewal.

However, when we know our work and ministry has meaning,
when we know it is grounded in the call of God to love,
then we are more apt to persevere
and carry on no matter what befalls us.

Lovette Weems tells the story of talking
to an old African American Methodist preacher in Mississippi.
One day the preacher told his listener,
*"Lovette, one thing I have learned about ministry.
When I was a boy, I had to walk a long, long way to school to get an education.
And I would walk, and I would get tired.
And then I would stop.
I would get rested, and then I would start again and walk as long as I could
until I got tired. Then I would sit down. Then I would rest and be renewed.
Then I would start walking again."*

Lovette Weems says that he hears the preacher's words
as a parable about the need for perseverance in our ministry
(Willimon, 8-26-07, p. 39),
in the church, in the community, in our lives.

All Power Be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!