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“A Touch of Wonder”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, May 30, 2021
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Isaiah 6: 1-8 John 3: 1-17

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!”

John 3: 1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” ³ Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

¹¹ “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷ Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

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Sermon

*(I am deeply indebted to the Rev. Don C. Brewer, my beloved Father-in-Love, for his exegetical and theological insights which helped to inspire this message.
Portions of his teachings are included, for which we are grateful.)*

A Touch of Wonder

Abraham Lincoln spoke at the dedication of the Gettysburg National Cemetery,
In what became known as the Gettysburg Address,

President 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.”*

To be consecrated is to be set apart or dedicated to the service of God.
God has consecrated you, called you, chosen you
far above our poor power to add or detract.

This morning we have before us two powerful Biblical passages,
one from Isaiah 6, the other from 3rd chapter of the Gospel of John.
The Holy Scriptures inspire us to affirm
that God chooses, calls & consecrates the whole people of God.

a touch of wonder

Atlanta’s own Curtis Mayfield sang of “*the wonders of you.*”
There is something sacred, something intimate, delightfully personal
about seeing the wonders of you, of God, of life,
of seeing someone else as made in the image of God.
Do you believe or think that God marvels at the wonder of you?

a touch of wonder

In the Gospel of Joh, Jesus was a wandering, nomadic rabbi
when he encountered an established religious leader named Nicodemus.

We get to overhear what happened
when Jesus Christ and Nicodemus reached out to one another.

Jesus said to Nicodemus,
*“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God
without being born from above.”*

Nicodemus misunderstood the statement of faith.

Taking it literally, he said to Jesus,
*“How can anyone be born after having grown old?
Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”*

Jesus answered,
*“Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God
without being born of water and Spirit.
What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.*

My father-in-love Rev. Don Brewer opens this passage for us with a fresh outlook.
Don points out that, in effect, Nicodemus said to Jesus Christ:

*“I sense the Rule of God in what you do!
These signs cannot be done without the presence of God.”*

Jesus responded,
*“No one can see the Kingdom of God
unless they are born anew from above.”*

This is similar to how Jesus is quoted in other gospels:

In Matthew 18:3 -- *“Unless you change and become like children,
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

In Mark 10:15 -- *“Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child
will never enter it.”*

Nicodemus certainly understood the conversation to be saying, “become a child again.”

He certainly had a sense of awe,
sensed the presence of God in who Jesus was, is, will always be.

Yet he took the Messiah’s comment literally.

Can a man enter his mother’s womb again?

Can a woman do this?

How could he start life over?

Very puzzling!

God meets us in our confusion,
unpacking the truth that being born again, from above, *anowhen*,
connects us with the refreshing, renewing Spirit of God.

God in Christ calls you and me to live and serve with a fresh sense of wonder,
with a curiosity which is never satiated,
with an expectation that discovery will go on and on
and way beyond our expectations.

a touch of wonder

Ever notice that when folks recognize
that God is calling for us to serve together, to make a difference in community,
sometimes we initially get confused, or distracted, or reluctant.

The Holy Scriptures are replete with faith journeys that begin with a call to follow God,
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? Called? Chosen?
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, fled by land and sea toward Tarshish.
Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., confessed that he was weary.
When the Angel Gabriel called on Mother Mary, she wondered, "How can this be?"
The day Sarah was called to start a family
at her advanced age...well, Sarah simply laughed.
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."

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!"

The Prophet Isaiah protested God's call 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.
*'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..."

*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!"*

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.

The Lord needs souls to embody a sense of wonder,

to sense and envision the possibilities God sets before us.

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 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, chosen and called to love.

Like Isaiah, our unclean lips,
the fact that we live among a people of unclean lips,
means only we ought to humble our self, stop behaving badly,
start belonging beautifully, wash our faces 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

breaking through 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, Called, Chosen for love.

a touch of wonder

The Rev. Dr. Derrick Harkins served God as pastor and servant leader
to folks from all walks of life,

including homemakers and the homeless,

teachers, students, providers of care and compassion,

and President Obama and the First Family.

My wife Betty and I remember well

when the three of us were fresh-faced, first-year students

at Union Theological Seminary in NYC.

Tall, handsome and dashing, a recent graduate of Boston University

he was green behind the ears, as were many of us.

During our freshman year at seminary
Derrick Harkins was asked to preach at a Good Friday service.
Afterward, while relaxing in the dormitory,
he told a group of us the story of that Lenten evening.
He said he was asked to preach
the seventh of seven sermons from seven ministers;
each preacher was assigned one of Jesus' seven last words.
By the time young Derrick got up to speak
the congregation had already heard the Word six times,
and each sermon was delivered
from well-respected and accomplished preachers.
Derrick wondered inside whether the congregation,
which by this point in the service was well-sated with good preaching,
would, upon seeing his youthful presence,
hear or heed the Word God had given him to deliver.
Rev. Harkins looked folks in the eyes and said,
(and here I paraphrase a statement heard 27 years ago!),
*"Good evening.
As you can well see, I am the youngest preacher here,
and my fellow speakers' wisdom and experience far exceeds my own.
I am just now starting my seminary training
while my esteemed colleagues
have years of pastoral leadership in their wake.
I know I do not know as much as my elders.
Yet there is one thing I do know:
'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..."*

Derrick told us that when the church heard him speak of his call to preach, to serve, to love,
a call he likened to that of the Prophet Isaiah,
the congregation clapped and shouted for him to bring them the Word.

When I listened to Derrick tell his story,
the hairs on the back of my neck stood up.
A shiver went down my spine.
Still does, still does.
Anytime someone shares their call story, shivers go down my spine. Everytime.
Derrick, Isaiah, Nicodemus, you and you and you
are Consecrated, Called, Chosen by God for love,
"...far more than our poor power to add or detract."

Let your life speak this blessed truth:
"I heard the voice of the Lord saying,

"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"

And I said,

-- say this with me now --

"Here am I; send me!"

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!