

Qualified Regardless

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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Isaiah 6:1-8 (CEV) ¹ In the year that King Uzziah died, I had a vision of the LORD. He was on his throne high above, and his robe filled the temple. ² Flaming creatures with six wings each were flying over him. They covered their faces with two of their wings and their bodies with two more. They used the other two wings for flying, ³ as they shouted, “Holy, holy, holy, LORD All-Powerful! The earth is filled with your glory.”

⁴ As they shouted, the doorposts of the temple shook, and the temple was filled with smoke. ⁵ Then I cried out, “I’m doomed! Everything I say is sinful, and so are the words of everyone around me. Yet I have seen the King, the LORD All-Powerful.”

⁶ One of the flaming creatures flew over to me with a burning coal that it had taken from the altar with a pair of metal tongs. ⁷ It touched my lips with the hot coal and said, “This has touched your lips. Your sins are forgiven, and you are no longer guilty.”

⁸ After this, I heard the LORD ask, “Is there anyone I can send? Will someone go for us?”
“I’ll go,” I answered. “Send me!”

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 (NRSV) ¹ Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, ² through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

³ For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴ and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. ¹¹ Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

Week by week, Presbyterian preachers can choose to base their sermons on whichever Bible readings they want. One possible plan is to use a list of suggested readings for each Sunday, a list called the “lectionary.” It’s a big list that covers a three-year period. Bible scholars and church leaders from various traditions got together to select passages for each Sunday from the Psalms, the rest of the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the rest of the New Testament. Often you can find a unifying theme in the readings for a particular day.

Today’s readings are from the lectionary’s suggested list. And a unifying theme that emerged for me from today’s readings is this: God calls us to be God’s servants even though we don’t feel qualified or worthy.

You all have heard of the sketch-comedy show “Saturday Night Live.” It’s been on the air for over four decades. In its early years, the show’s cast of improv actors was known collectively as the “Not Ready for Prime-Time Players.” That self-deprecating moniker was intended to tell you, “Don’t get your hopes up; we aren’t the most

talented, experienced performers you've ever seen. We probably don't belong on network television." Talk about low self-esteem!

Indeed, in a movie based on characters created for "Saturday Night Live," two aspiring rock musicians named Wayne and Garth are awestruck and overcome by a sense of unworthiness when they encounter one of their idols, rock star Alice Cooper: dropping to their knees and bowing before him, they repeat, "We're not worthy! We're not worthy!"

Well, the Bible is filled with figures who felt themselves "not ready for prime-time," not worthy of being considered as God's servant. When God approached them, cornered them, called them, they wondered if God had made a mistake – surely God wasn't planning to depend on them!

- Moses protested that his more articulate brother Aaron would be better equipped to be a leader of people.¹
- When God told Abraham and Sarah that they would give birth to what would become a large nation, Sarah brushed off God with a laugh, protesting that she was far too old to have a baby.²
- Overwhelmed by God's knowledge and power, Job responded meekly, "I am unworthy – how can I reply to you?"³
- The prophet Jeremiah responded to God's call with hesitation, saying, "I cannot speak, I am only a boy."⁴

In today's Old Testament reading we heard the prophet Isaiah recalling a dream, a vision he had which had initiated his service to God. In Isaiah's vision, the power and grandeur of God was like a regal robe so immense that it filled the Temple to overflowing. Overwhelmed by the mystery and majesty of God, Isaiah cried out "I'm doomed! Everything I say is sinful, and so are the words of everyone around me. Yet I have seen the King, the Lord All-Powerful."⁵

Isaiah watched as a winged servant of the Almighty took a burning coal from the altar. A touch of the coal purified Isaiah's lips to be able to speak God's message to the people. Then Isaiah perceived the voice of the Lord asking, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Despite his keen awareness that he didn't *begin* to measure up to the holiness of God, Isaiah probably surprised himself to hear himself responding, "Here am I; send me."⁶

Another of today's suggested Bible readings came from St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. In Chapter 15, Paul presented his qualifications as a church planter in the most unusual way: by pointing out how he didn't deserve to be called by God. Paul wrote that so many others had been called to servanthood before Paul himself had been. Paul wrote that after Jesus was raised from death Jesus appeared to Simon Peter, the Twelve (minus Judas, of course), then more than 500 brothers and sisters in the faith,

¹ Exodus 4:10-17

² Genesis 18:9-15

³ Job 40:4a NIV

⁴ Jeremiah 1:6

⁵ Isaiah 6:5 Contemporary English Version

⁶ Isaiah 6:8 New Revised Standard Version

then to James and the apostles. Only then did Jesus call to Paul. For Paul it was obvious that so many others were far more deserving to serve Jesus than he was.

“Last of all,” Paul wrote, “he appeared also to me.” Paul felt unworthy. He described himself as “the least of the apostles,” indeed, “unfit to be called an apostle” because of his history with Christians. What history? Before he heard the call of Jesus and began to serve him, Paul had actively pursued and persecuted those who did follow Jesus. Famously, when an anti-Jesus mob attacked Stephen (the first deacon of the Christian church) and stoned him to death, Paul stood and watched approvingly... while holding the cloaks of the attackers.⁷ Even someone as articulate, well-educated, well-connected, and devoted as Paul felt that he wasn’t worthy to be called to serve God with his life.

And although we didn’t hear today’s suggested gospel reading, the beginning of Luke Chapter 5 described Simon Peter suddenly feeling totally unworthy to be included in Jesus’ close circle of acquaintances. Luke tells of a time when Jesus sat in a fishing boat to teach a crowd gathered on the beach. When he had finished his lesson, Jesus had Peter and others row away from shore. Then he told them to deploy their fishing nets. Peter initially protested; the previous night of fishing had been quite unproductive, he explained. But then Peter did as Jesus said. Suddenly the nets were miraculously filled with such an enormous load of fish that Peter and his deckhands hurriedly called their partners James and John in another boat to come help them bring the catch onboard.

What was Peter’s reaction? Did he tell Jesus, “Wow, I’m taking you with me whenever I go fishing”? No. As he strained and struggled to pull the nets into the boat, Peter stopped. “...He knelt down in front of Jesus and said, ‘Lord, don’t come near me! I am a sinner.’”⁸

So do you hear the thread that runs through the Bible passages for this Lord’s Day?

- Isaiah protested that he and everyone around him were stained by sinfulness and undeserving of God’s favor.
- Paul couldn’t forget how he had actively persecuted followers of Jesus, and how so many others had been worthy of being called to follow Jesus before Jesus tapped him.
- In the presence of the truly God-given power of Jesus, Peter was keenly aware of how far he fell short of embodying the character and spirit of Jesus.

What can we take from that thread of all those biblical characters being called to serve God *despite* feeling incapable, unqualified, unworthy? Simply this: you can add your name to the thread. God’s plans include you, plans of blessing not judgment, plans of opportunity regardless of anything in your mind or in your past that you think excludes you from being loved and embraced by God. What kind of things, you ask?

⁷ See Acts 6:1-6; 7:58

⁸ Luke 5:8 Contemporary English Version

- Maybe you were raised to not give God much thought, but lately your growing awareness of your gratitude for your life is prompting you to wonder if God would even accept your thankfulness.
- Perhaps you're aware of prejudices you hold that you wish you could shake, but you're having a hard time doing it.
- Maybe in a moment of impatience or anger or negligence you deeply hurt someone you still care about, and both they and you remain scarred by it.
- Or you were damaged by someone – perhaps a very, very long time ago – but your feelings of anger or shame have you believing that you don't deserve to be loved by God.

Who cares if *we* feel qualified? God qualifies you. Regardless of how deserving or unqualified you may feel, irrespective of what you may have done or not done, God loves you. God wants your love in return. God has a plan for you – a plan that will contribute to God's plan, God's will coming closer to fruition "on earth as it is in heaven" as they say.

We're all unlikely candidates for discipleship, every last one of us. Just look around the typical church sanctuary. There are no super-Christians – only ordinary people, hesitant in their faith, sometimes wavering in their commitment, [sometimes] difficult to live with. As a collective group, [we're] sinful, hypocritical, stingy, short-tempered, insecure – in short, no different from any other gathering of human beings on this globe.

Yet haven't we all – somewhere, sometime – heard something of God's call in our lives? Each time..., we have a choice. We can say yes to God's call – however hesitantly – or we can go our own way.

There's only one requirement for discipleship, in the last analysis: a willingness to submit to God's call. You don't have to be smart, strong, healthy, or even particularly religious. All you need to do is listen when God calls, and then get up and do what's needed.⁹

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⁹ HomileticsOnline.com February 6, 2022 at <https://www.homileticsonline.com/members/installment/93041345> accessed 1/25/2022