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Isaiah 6:8, New Living Translation

⁸Then I heard the Lord asking, "Whom should I send as a messenger to this people? Who will go for us?"

I said, "Here I am. Send me."

Dynamite: *Send me.*

Before I start with a personal story, let me say that I have never been arrested, never even had a traffic ticket. I was a straight A student all the way through school, never got into trouble in or out of school. I was a totally boring follow-the-rules Christian kid. Well, most of time I was a follow-the-rules kid. Here is the story. I had a rather short Boy Scout career. I made it all the way to Tenderfoot. I earned one merit badge, horsemanship, believe it or not. They took us to a stable where we were all supposed to learn how to saddle a horse, get the reins on it, and get up on the horse. The big part was to make the horse march around in a ring and do stuff. It all looked intimidating to me, so I asked the owner of the ranch if he had a horse that would be nice and compliant and could do all the riding stuff by itself without my direction. He grinned, winked at me, and then said that when he handed out the horses, he would give me his horse. I passed

the test in a flash and while the other kids slaved in the hot sun with their stubborn horses, I sat in the shade and drank lemonade. But that's not the story I want to tell. When I was growing up in Oxnard, California, in Ventura County, near the beach, in a wonderful place that I loved, a large apartment complex was being built across the street. It consisted of several buildings, each with exterior steel and cement staircases. Each building had I think three floors. I loved to hang around construction sites, and so I spent a lot of time at the site of these apartment buildings while they were going up. They had to do some blasting to build them, and that was a lot of fun to watch. One Sunday afternoon, as I was wandering through the piles of lumber, windows stacked and ready to be installed, and roofing materials piled on large palettes, I came across what I instantly realized was dynamite. Now, I only stole one half-stick. Just one half-stick. I knew enough to steal a blasting cap and fuse, as well. And as it turned out, I had a great opportunity to make use of the dynamite – at a Scout jamboree that I was going to the next week. I will get back to this.

Isaiah was perhaps the best-known Hebrew prophet at the time of Jesus, and he is certainly the mostly highly referenced in the New Testament. One of the reasons for Isaiah's popularity is that his writings have been interpreted as predicting the arrival of Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah of the Jews and the

Messiah of all people. Like almost all biblical characters, most of what we know about him comes from the Hebrew Scriptures. There are some archeological artifacts that support his existence as a human, and there are references to him in extracanonical documents. All in all, we know very little about his personal life. His name means *“Yahweh - or God - gives salvation”* or *“Yahweh - or God - is salvation”*. Isaiah served as a prophet in Judah, the southern part of Israel, which included Jerusalem. He prophesized between 742 and 687 B.C. Judah was under threat from Assyria. The northern part of Israel was no longer even minimally independent and was occupied by Assyria. When he spoke for God, as prophets did, Isaiah argued for having faith in God, about the rewards of living by God’s laws, and about the dangers of disobeying them. It is ultimately an uplifting book, in that it offers a profound message of hope for the people of God. Prophets sometimes arise as prophets when they answer to a majestic, very literal call from God. In the following passage, Isaiah tells us what happened when he was asked to answer the call of God. The following passage is Isaiah 6:1-8. The first verse refers to King Uzziah, who served for about 52 years, starting when he was sixteen, and he reigned over Judah in the mid 700’s B.C. He was responsible for transforming Judah into a powerful economic and military power. But his reign ended in tragedy due to his downfall, which was a result of his pride.

It was in the year King Uzziah died that I saw the Lord. He was sitting on a lofty throne, and the train of his robe filled the Temple. ²Attending him were mighty seraphim, each having six wings. With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³They were calling out to each other,

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Heaven’s Armies!

The whole earth is filled with his glory!”

⁴Their voices shook the Temple to its foundations, and the entire building was filled with smoke.

⁵Then I said, “It’s all over! I am doomed, for I am a sinful man. I have filthy lips, and I live among a people with filthy lips. Yet I have seen the King, the LORD of Heaven’s Armies.”

⁶Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal he had taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷He touched my lips with it and said, “See, this coal has touched your lips. Now your guilt is removed, and your sins are forgiven.”

⁸Then I heard the Lord asking, “Whom should I send as a messenger to this people? Who will go for us?”

I said, “Here I am. Send me.”

The way in which God calls on a prophet to initially serve is typically broken into two categories by biblical scholars. Calls of the first category consist of the voice of God dominating the experience. The second category relates to prophetic calls to duty that are dominated by a visual or physical embodiment of God, some sort of well-rounded manifestation of Yahweh. This is called a *theophany*. While Isaiah does hear an audible voice, the voice of God, his call to duty is far greater than this, and is considered a theophanic event. Isaiah experiences an extremely literal, wondrous appearance of God. Isaiah sees God “*sitting on a lofty throne*” in the Temple. God is wearing a vast robe that fills the

Temple. He is attended by “*mighty seraphim, each having six wings*”. The vision becomes rather cosmic when he continues, saying this about the seraphim:

*“With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³ They were calling out to each other,
“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Heaven’s Armies!
The whole earth is filled with his glory!”*

These voices shake the Temple down to the stone foundation. The Temple fills with smoke. Isaiah, the man who is about to become a prophet, realizes that even as a deeply sinful man, he has been visited by God. He says:

I am doomed, for I am a sinful man. I have filthy lips, and I live among a people with filthy lips. Yet I have seen the King, the LORD of Heaven’s Armies.”

Through one of the seraphim God forgives Isaiah for his past. Then comes one of the most famous passages in the Bible, as Isaiah, speaking in the first person, responds to a penetrating question from God:

*“Whom should I send as a messenger to this people? Who will go for us?”
I said, “Here I am. Send me.”*

In most of the other instances of Old Testament prophets being called to speak for God, to be God’s intermediary between God and the People of God, the prophet initially hesitates, sometimes even trying to refuse. The new prophets are filled with awe and fear - and some want to run away. But not Isaiah. He does not hesitate. He instantly responds: “*Here I am. Send me.*” Isaiah is a

prophet during an extremely trying time for the Israelites. The massive empire of Assyria is rapidly expanding, overrunning the land that God has given to his people. Isaiah is there to tell the Israelites that God is punishing them for having become corrupt and no longer living moral, ethical lives. Specifically, Isaiah is very concerned with social justice, with everyone in a society being treated with dignity and respect, something that the Israelites have forgotten.

In fact, the Prophet Isaiah takes immense risk as a two-way conduit between God and the People of God. He presents his people with rather unpopular messages about God's judgment. He serves first King Uzziah, then Jotham, then Ahaz, then Hezekiah. At one point, he aggressively confronts the powerful King Ahaz, urging him to put his whole trust in God rather than making political and military alliances with the pagan, enemy Assyrian Empire. But instead, the king empties the Temple and royal treasuries to bribe the king of Assyria into not attacking Judah. Because of his willingness to stand up to multiple kings, Jewish writings outside the Bible tell us that Isaiah was ultimately executed. He not only responds to the call of God with enthusiasm – he aggressively pursues that mission during his extended time as a prophet.

Back to the dynamite and the Scout jamboree. I chose a time when almost everyone was off on a hike, made sure that the area was clear, and then blew up

a dirt hillside. It was a fantastic engineering experience, trust me. That was also the end of my Boy Scout career. I wasn't so much dishonorably discharged as I was strongly encouraged to take an early retirement. One scoutmaster told me that he knew that I thought I was doing this safely, but in truth I was being selfish. I wasn't thinking about others. Did you know, he said, that if anyone had been even close to the hillside, you could have permanently damaged their hearing?

I imagine, but don't really know, that none of us here today will ever have a powerful theophanic experience like Isaiah, where God appears before us in his magnificence, convicting us of what we have done wrong, forgiving and regenerating us, and then challenging us to devote our lives to his service. Isaiah's vision is a colorful metaphor for something far more subtle that happens to each of us when we keep our spiritual ears open and respond to the subtle call of God's grace within us. But how do we keep our spiritual ears open, so we don't miss the call of God? How do ensure that we don't bypass any opportunities to serve with courage and love like Isaiah did? Here are some suggestions:

1. First, pull yourself away from whatever in life is making your spiritual ears deaf. Leave your TV, your computer, your cell phone, whatever electronic things are yelling at you. The louder the voice in your physical ears, the harder it is for your spiritual ears to hear. There is evidence in the Book of Isaiah that he

was a high-ranking member of Jerusalem's wealthy elite before he left it all behind to answer God's call. We don't typically have to leave much behind.

2. Ask yourself what you would like to change about yourself to be a better, deeper, truer Christian. Often, it's the way that you think about certain people or certain classes of people. It can be envy about the things that other people have in life. It can be bitterness about things you don't have. It could be arrogance over your success or power or the societal respect you receive. This is humbling, makes you vulnerable spiritually, and allows you to approach God with a clean heart. Remember that Isaiah calls himself "*a sinful man*" with "*filthy lips*".

3. Think about how amazing it is that we don't have to be ignorant of God. As believers, we are thankful for Scripture. We are thankful for the legacy of faith in our culture that tells us that there truly is a God who cares about us, wants the best for us, and is waiting to hold us forever. Focus on just how beautiful God is. Don't be passive about this. Talk to God. You can use your physical voice or your mental voice. You don't have to use words. You can calmly focus on how much you want God to speak to you, to guide you, to bless you, to walk with you every step through life. Give thanks to God for what you have in life. And there is nothing wrong with asking God for help. Tell God if you feel a raw, agonizing anxiety, if your spouse or child is sick, if you are facing financial ruin, or a

dangerous illness, or a spouse who wants to leave. Ask God to intercede and do whatever is best for you as a believer. And yes, let God decide what is best.

4. Now that you are not distracted, have examined yourself critically, and are actively communicating with God - listen. Your spiritual ears let you will hear the gentle voice of God. I have a 5th piece of advice, but I'll hold it until the end.

The only person in my family who ever learned that I was forcibly retired from the Boy Scouts, rather than deciding to quit on my own, was my father. When I told him, he said I should thank God that I did not harm anyone. He asked me if I would ever do anything like that again. I said no, and I said I was particularly thankful that I didn't damage anyone's hearing – because I was being selfish and had indeed not thought about that particular danger to other people.

Here is something very important: Be respectful of other people's spiritual ears. It is a shame to not make use of your own spiritual ears, to not hear God calling you. But if do you anything to deafen someone else's spiritual ears, then that is truly tragic. I risked, without realizing it, damaging other people's physical ears because I was only thinking of entertaining myself. I'm sure you won't harm anyone's physical hearing. But you also do not want to damage people's spiritual ears because you're too busy thinking of yourself and therefore projecting a terrible example of what it means to be a true Christian. Help your fellow

believers develop their spiritual hearing. Be open to praying with people who are struggling to express their faith. Often, it's easier to do this with someone who is not particularly close to you. You won't feel as exposed. Don't feel you have to get down on your knees, close your eyes, fold your hands and mumble the kinds of stuff you have heard in the past about our almighty God, gracious redeemer, and blessed Savior. You can just use simple language. A great form of prayer is to tell God how much you want to open your spiritual ears and help others hear God, as well. You can thereby motivate your prayer partner to do the same.

Never stop trying to use your spiritual ears. Never grow frustrated if you don't feel your spiritual ears have good hearing. God's voice will come. Remember that God is always looking for people to speak for God, to act as his hands on this planet. We are not all prophets. We don't offer divine revelations from God to humanity. But we are all representatives of God in a world filled with cruelty and pain and hatred. Make sure that when you pray that you tell God you are very much ready. Tell God: *"Here I am. Send me."*

Here is my 5th, my last piece of advice: If you feel that God is taking too long to speak to you or that your spiritual ears are hard of hearing, then just start doing good in life. Be gracious and kind and forgiving. Be extremely proactive about it. That is often the path to finally hearing the voice of God loud and clear.