

January 15, 2017 - Following the Call

Isaiah 49:1-7

Islands listen to me!
Pay attention, distant peoples!
YHWH called me before I was born,
and named me from my mother's womb.

This is the prophet Isaiah shouting out to his people, the people of Israel, letting them know that he has something important to say. It's important because it comes from Yahweh, from God. It's important because he believes he was called to be Yahweh's messenger even before he was born. He believes this because of the name he was given while still in his mother's womb. You see, his name, Isaiah, means God saves, God heals, or God restores which, of course is the core of the message that the prophet was called to share with his people.

How many of you were named before you were born? How many of your parents had your name already decided? I've always been fascinated with stories about people's names. You see, my parents had to come up with my name rather quickly. My mother had picked out the name Colette, for a girl, I'm not sure what she had picked out for a boy. But when two of us came along, she had to quickly come up with another girl's name. I arrived first, so I got the name starting with "A" and my twin sister, got the name that had been chosen even before we were born. I love my name, not because it is connected in any way to my call, but because it is mine and my parents picked it for me.

Isaiah knew that he was named before he was born, so he believed that his call to be God's prophet also happened while he was still in his mother's womb. At bible study this week we were talking about call and how some children seem to have a sense of call or vocation from a very early age. I have a cousin named Dennis who knew he was going to be a farmer when he was six years old. We were in Grade one together and in art class, all he ever wanted to draw were tractors. Can you think of people you know like that? People who knew what they were called to do even when they were children?

Of course, then there's the rest of us who find our way into a career and maybe even begin a second or third vocation before we truly figure out what we were called to be. I'm not saying that's a bad thing. I know for me, I wasn't ready for this career when I graduated from university. I had some living and some growing and some healing to do before pastoral ministry was really a possibility. Often, it's not until we have a chance to look back at our lives, that we can see the logic or even the wonder of our life's trajectory.

Isaiah goes on to say, "He made my mouth like a sharp sword... he made me a polished arrow." Isaiah is using this metaphor to say that God not only called him to be a prophet, Yahweh also provided him with the skills that he would need to perform this task. He made sure Isaiah had the ability to speak with a clear and a strong and a penetrating message... a message like an arrow.

This is one of the challenging parts of being called by God. Sometimes we have a sense of call, but we ignore it because we don't think we have the skills or the knowledge or the ability to take on the task. For instance, a couple of years ago, our Nominations Committee approached a member of our congregation about becoming the chair of one of our committees. This person was very hesitant because they had never chaired a meeting, in fact, they had very little experience in meetings where parliamentary procedure (agenda, motions, adjournments) were being used. But what this congregational member had was a sense of purpose and a strong desire to make a difference. They asked for the help they needed and it didn't take long before they also had the ability to skillfully run a meeting. It would have been a huge loss to this congregation if Amy Popick had never chaired our Outreach Committee and, subsequently, our Refugee Sponsorship Working Group. Thank goodness she had the courage to move beyond her fear and take on a new challenge.

One of my favourite lines in this scripture passage is Isaiah's admission of his own humanity. After expressing his call, he admits: "I had been thinking, "I have toiled in vain, I have exhausted myself for nothing!" You see, the Israelites were living in exile in Babylonia and God had called Isaiah to "restore the tribes ... and bring back the survivors of Israel." So far, despite all his efforts, his people still lived in a distant land far from their home in Judah. Even with his deep sense of call, Isaiah admitted that sometimes he was discouraged and wondered why he bothered.

This is so real, so true. It doesn't matter how much we love the work that we have been called to, there are times when we feel overwhelmed and discouraged. It doesn't mean we are on the wrong path, it just means we're human. Any of us who have worked in the church either in a paid position or as volunteers, know that difficult times occur even when we are doing God's work. Sometimes, when personalities clash or programs falter or energy flags we struggle to remember why we answered the call.

It was in that time of despair, that Isaiah reminded himself that he was doing this work for God. "Yet all the while my cause was with YHWH, and my reward was with my God." We follow the call because we believe in a God who is the essence of love, a God of justice and peace, a God of healing and reconciliation. We follow the call because we believe that what we are doing will make a difference in the lives of the people in our congregation, in our community and in our world.

One of the interesting aspects of this particular passage from scripture is that scholars have a hard time agreeing whether God's call was to Isaiah, the prophet, or to Israel, the descendants of Jacob. You see, the passage also includes lines like, "You are my Servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." and "I will make you a light to the nations, so that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." Many argue that the entire passage is focussed on the people of Israel, not their prophet, Isaiah. But I think it works both way. I think, Isaiah was

called to be a prophet to his people, the Israelites and I believe that the Israelites had a call to be a prophet or a light, to all the other nations.

In the same way, each of us as individuals, are called by God and we are also called by God as a congregation to fulfill our mission. Whether we were called while still in the womb or were tapped on the shoulder just this morning, it doesn't matter. As we move into a new year, as we move toward another annual general meeting of this congregation, let us accept our call willingly knowing that we will be given the patience, the courage, the strength, and the skills required to do God's work in this community and in the world.