

The Call – Above and Beyond

Isaiah 6: 1-8

John 3: 1-17

To "go above and beyond the call of duty" means to do a lot more than is required or expected for your job. On Memorial Day weekend, we will find lots of stories being told of individuals faced with extreme circumstances.

Iraq war veteran and writer Phil Klay wrote a [compelling piece](#) – very long – about the experience of the call to combat duty a couple of years ago. He starts with a story about his training:

At Officer Candidates School, boot camp for officers, the Sergeant Instructor asked the hardest, craziest questions. No softballs. ... The first time he paced down the squad bay, all of us at attention in front of our racks, he grilled the would-be infantry guys with, "Would it bother you, ordering men into an assault where you know some will die?" and the would-be pilots with, "Do you think you could drop a bomb on an enemy target, knowing you might also kill women and kids?"

When he got to me, down at the end, he unloaded one of his more involved hypotheticals. "Say you think there's an insurgent in a house and you call in air support. Then when you walk through the rubble, there's no insurgents, just this dead Iraqi civilian with his brains spilling out of his head, his legs still twitching and a little Iraqi kid at his side asking you why his father won't get up. So. What are you going to tell that Iraqi kid?"

... That Sergeant Instructor was trying to clue us in to something few people give enough thought to when they sign up: [it] isn't just about exposing yourself to the trials and risks of combat—it's also about exposing yourself to moral risk.

The story about the Sergeant Instructor seeks to prepare those motivated to serve for the moral challenges they will surely face in combat situations, to help them clear away any notions of gallantry or nobility in their service. They will be facing a monstrous mess when, at times, there is no good, moral, or rational answer. None.

The call to serve can have dimensions that we'd never imagine. Indeed, we can try to prepare, seek to assemble the tools, provide ourselves with graded experiences, but in the challenges of service, there needs to be a higher calling that pushes forward those who were called. That can take a variety of forms. In military service, it may begin with a sense of duty to nation – patriotism – and continue in a goal of providing security for that nation. But those noble notions are thin porridge when the specter of violence, destruction, and death gets unleashed. There appears the commitment to others, particularly in your own unit, which can exceed even the commitment to one's own personal safety.

Our scriptures have nothing to do with military service or the potential for violence, but everything to do with serving a higher calling and trying to understand what resources are required by those who would serve.

This passage about the calling of the prophet comes rather late, not until chapter 6. In those earlier chapters, God shares with Isaiah his frustration at the futility of his people's worship, their sacrifices, incense burning, prayers, special holidays and Sabbath observances. God found them a waste of time and effort, fraudulent covers from a faithless people who otherwise disregard God's law and will, condoning injustice, and sponsoring idolatry. It could easily be said that God's people have made their routine of worship into a matter of occasional piety, a self-satisfying spirituality that imposes no undue expectations and maintains a veneer of dutiful propriety without requiring sacrifice, submission, confession, or commitment.

God seeks to awaken God's people to the truth of God's presence, spiritual power, the demands of God's Kingdom, and the promise of new life. In a real sense, this is awakening to faith, pure and simple. The one who is called must have faith, able to envision above and beyond what's seen and tangible, and reach for what is above beyond with confidence that there is a promise awaiting fulfillment.

For this special kind of mission, God comes to Isaiah in a new way. In chapter 6, most commentators read the textual clues to indicate that Isaiah is in Jerusalem's Temple. We might assume that Isaiah is there for worship on a regular basis, and this is just another occasion of coming before the Lord in his own faithful piety. However, on this day, Isaiah has a dramatic vision of God on a throne, the train of his robe filling the Temple, and six-winged seraphs in attendance. This is not like the messages which Isaiah had received before. This was far above and beyond Isaiah's experience, and we can imagine him open-mouthed in awe.

The theophany (\$5 word for divine appearance, for God becoming present) starts rolling as the seraphim – literally fiery celestial beings, even dragons – begin calling or singing to each thunderously: *Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.* This song of divine praise is a call to worship and adoration of God.

This earth-shaking, overwhelming display has Isaiah petrified and sobbing. *Woe to me! I'm ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips....* The seraph acts on this confession of sinfulness and flies to Isaiah bearing a hot coal from the altar in tongs. I doubt that a seraph is flying toward you with a live coal is at all calming for Isaiah.

The seraph touches his lips and declares, *See, this has touched your lips and your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.* By this gracious act of God, the guilt, any verdict against him, is thrown out and dismissed completely. The actions to bring redress and recompense, the penalty and restitution, have similarly been graciously satisfied, paid-in-full. The confession of sin by Isaiah is followed by the assurance of God's pardon and forgiveness from the seraph. This is the opening order of every Sunday service here: call to worship, adoration, confession, and assurance of forgiveness.

We can imagine Isaiah is still trembling, but a bit relieved now. Now he also has first-hand experience of the burden of his sinfulness as he stood before God, having full knowledge of his sinfulness, and then experiencing the blessing of gracious forgiveness.

But we aren't finished here yet. God has a purpose beyond engaging Isaiah in the worship ritual. Remember, the seraphs have been singing, and the seraph announced the forgiveness. Now we have God's first words in this scene. *Whom shall I send? And who shall go for us?* Isaiah, beneficiary of this breath-taking display of divine grandeur and incredible grace, hears this question and immediately answers: *Here am I. Send me!*

God has accomplished two things, having awakened his servant Isaiah and recruiting him for a (thankless) mission to God's people, who in turn will seek to awaken God's people in Judah.

Isaiah was sure that he was inadequate for anything, a man of unclean lips from a people of unclean lips. He had earlier heard God's pronouncements against his own people, and Isaiah realized that **he** was one of those people, a sinner like all the rest. But by God's gracious healing, Isaiah is made new, ready to respond eagerly to God's call to serve in this challenging mission assignment.

Isaiah had no qualifications, no experience, and no obvious gifts. But he did know God and had experienced God's gracious blessing. His renewed spirit made him a willing servant, willing to be led by the Spirit of God into mission as God's servant above and beyond. Like the story told in the beginning, there will be challenges and demands that he could hardly imagine at the outset, but the power of the Spirit and a devoted faithfulness to his mission would lead him above and beyond what he thought possible.

In John's gospel, chapter 3 tells of a member of the Jewish ruling council, Nicodemus, taking the unusual step of coming to where Jesus was staying. It would seem that Nicodemus had heard of Jesus' miracles, and perhaps had heard Jesus' teaching firsthand in the Temple. (Remember, in John's gospel, Jesus enters Jerusalem and clears the Temple market in the *beginning* of the gospel, not at the end as in the synoptic gospels.)

Nicodemus arrives at night. This seems rather furtive, but it may also have been what Jesus' people arranged when Nicodemus sought a meeting. That Jesus should remain hidden and out of view should not surprise us. From different hints in the gospels, it seems that he remarkably deft at escaping difficult situations and evading his pursuing persecutors.

The dialogue should be familiar. Nicodemus shows a knack for saying the obvious, giving him a rather dim-witted aura. He begins by saying: *Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these miraculous signs that you do if God were not with him.*

Jesus replies to him each time by answering the question which Nicodemus **should** have asked, but didn't. It makes the dialogue rather disjointed. Jesus speaks about the need to be born again, followed by Nicodemus feebly grappling with how a person can *be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb*. Like I said, Nicodemus seems rather dim-witted.

After talking then about the water and the Spirit, Jesus says, *You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'*” Jesus then speaks about the wind blowing and being born of the Spirit. Unsurprisingly, it seems like Nicodemus is quite confused (and you could be confused, too).

Jesus is dismayed that a learned leader of the Jews cannot follow along and understand. Nicodemus is bravely trying, but he seems to be foundering right now. Jesus's teaching has aroused Nicodemus to flaws and contradictions in **his** assumptions about faithfulness to God. Jesus' teaching and ministry have gotten him questioning his own spirituality and standing as a faithful servant of God. As an influential leader himself, Jesus' portrayal of the kingdom of God stands in marked contrast to the worldly powers to which Nicodemus has been a loyal leader. Nicodemus is alerted to what is above and beyond, and the spiritual priority involved. Coming to Jesus in the dark, we hope that Nicodemus leaves with the light of the Spirit on his path going forward, and the good news of Jesus in his mouth.

The end of today's passage is the familiar John 3:16 – *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* – but it is coupled with the completely unknown John 3:17: *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him*. It's a key message for Nicodemus, and even for us.

The memorable phrase in verse 16 is that *God so loved the world*, love being the singular expression of the most precious gift to be given. Yet, even today, many people have a deep and abiding faith in a God of judgment and condemnation. That's why verse 17 is all about God's agenda **not** to condemn, but to save and bring new life. The aim is to share God's love in Jesus, and have people embrace love as the priority sacred value.

The call to serve in Isaiah will later have the Spirit of God anointing God's chosen servant in sacred mission. The gospel of love and liberation is not new, but its powerful message gets renewed in Jesus and his ministry. It is a call from above and beyond, summoning faithful servants like us to respond to the mission of a new day and its new challenges

And that call will push us above and beyond, requiring us to rely faithfully in the power of the Holy Spirit to advance our mission and service in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Savior.