

Here Am I! Send Me!
Rev. Dr. Beth Johnson

CENTERING

Isaiah 6:8

HERE AM I! SEND ME!

Have you ever been called?

Called to do, be, see beyond that which you had planned, imagined, or even could dream?

Have you ever been silent when you should have spoken?

Done nothing when you should have acted?

Seen and turned away?

Has your heart ever been like stone?

Have you beheld a beauty and a vision that inspires awe and wonder such that you were speechless?

And has that beauty and vision softened your heart and freed you to be bold, to speak, do, see in ways that you had not planned, imagined, or even dreamed?

Isaiah 6, the passage from the Hebrew Scriptures on which our story and song are based today, is about these things...

What is going on in Isaiah 6?

This passage is in the form of mystical Judaism, called Merkabah, or chariot mysticism. This form appears mostly in the book of Ezekiel, in this passage of Isaiah we're concerned with today, in the book of Daniel, and in what is called intertextual literature, and some Gnostic and Qumran (think Dead Sea Scroll) texts.

Li-Anne brought the images to us...the Holy is on a throne in a chariot with the Seraphim and angels – with the angels calling “holy, holy, holy!”

When these symbols appear you know something big is about to happen! The prophet Isaiah has a vision of this intense experience of God, the Holy...full of glory...

Process theologian Bruce Epperly tells us what is going on during this time in this text:

“The country was falling apart. The leadership was corrupt and clueless, and was going in the wrong direction faster and faster. And that day, Isaiah showed up at the temple, no doubt, simply for a moment of peace and comfort, and to escape from chaos of the political situation into the familiar comfort of the liturgy. Crowds milled around him, and others said their prayers, but Isaiah alone experienced the Holy One of Israel personally and directly.”

The prophet is afraid...and uncertain – silenced...when one of the seraphs flew to him and touched his lips with coal and freed him to speak...

Wow...now that would be quite an experience...but that wasn't the end of it...There was a job to do...and who was going to do it?

Who would speak to the people, whose hearts had been hardened...

Who would speak to them of love...who would they bear light to them?

And Isaiah said, “Here Am I! Send Me!”

Isaiah answered the call, knowing it would be a challenge, knowing he would be changed, but knowing he would not be alone...

Isaiah's experience can be understood as a mystical connection with the Holy...the Holy calls and Isaiah answers – Here am I! Send Me!

But here we might ask, so, who or what is calling.

Some among us will say “God,” others among us will say “Love,” others among us will say “Life,” others will say the Sacred, some will say a still, small voice and oh my it sounds like Mine! Others will say creation or the universe...or beauty, truth, and goodness.

This passage from Isaiah being from a mystical tradition opens it to all of us...theists and nontheists, scientists and singers, extroverts and introverts...

This mysticism is thought of by some as love for God and for the union and oneness with God. It is the holy within and without

But for some it is unitive oneness with all things...that living, breathing experience of interconnectedness and interdependence.

It is mindfulness, attentiveness...

It is being awed by the Universe, by evolution, by Life itself...

German philosopher, theologian, and activist, Dorothee Soelle in her book, *The Silent Call: Mysticism and Resistance*. suggests that across traditions, within all human experience, there is that to which we can relate with depth and meaning and to which we can respond.

And that's what she calls it the "Silent Cry".

I call it the More-ness or sometimes just Love...

Soelle suggests that this is a universal experience, which while linked historically to religious traditions, is experienced by **everyone** as a coming home to who and what we truly are...and what is accessible to us all...Love, connection, awe.

And I will say to you that we are all called at some time or another by that which is both within and without and when we are called, we must choose, and what will we say?

But first HOW ARE WE CALLED AND TO WHAT?

Well, not all of us have a vision of seraphim and chariots...

For some of us it's different...

PAT'S CALL STORY

At the General Assembly in 2009, in Portland, former Fellowship member, now UU minister, Pat McLaughlin and I went into the exhibit hall for a bite to eat. As we sat down to eat I said to him, "Pat, when are you going to go to seminary?" And Pat said, "Do I have to?"

Now that is the quintessential answer to a call...what a perfect response from one who has been called!

Do I have to? Me? Now? Really

Now there was no doubt in my mind that Pat was supposed to be a UU minister (and I know that many of you thought that too), Pat wasn't too sure.

Unbeknownst to me, Pat was already planning later that day to go to a session scheduled for those thinking about ministry...and I didn't know that Pat had mentioned to Barb, his wife, the night before that he was thinking about going to that session...her reaction is her story!

But Pat was perturbed...

Calls are like that – perturbing...unsettling...our lips are touched with coal after all...

And the next morning on his way to the Convention Center, the day I would ask him when he was going to seminary, Pat was sitting on the train thinking about going to that session on ministry and he heard a voice, "just do it so you don't have to think about it again." Operative word in that sentence – "again." That still, small voice that Pat says was his had already been calling.

Now I love call stories – many of you have heard mine: It too involves a voice...

I love call stories because of the "yes!" that they signify.

And I have to tell you...I do so love this text: Love asked: Whom shall we send? And the prophet answered: Here am I! Send Me!

This passage was the text for the sermon that my minister, the Rev. Dr. Karen Stoyanoff, preached at my ordination...And that was the theme of her ordination...

And it summarizes what is crucial for me –

The Holy, as Karen described it, needs us! Is not all powerful and all pushy...no...

We are needed to bring do the work of Love in the world...

AND WHAT DO WE SAY?

Will you say yes to your call?

Now your call is not necessarily to seminary like Pat and me...but to that which presents itself to you to be heard or held or healed...

Perhaps it is a new endeavor, a job, a relationship, an opportunity to create something new...

Perhaps it is to the world.

Whatever it is our connection to all that is calls and we respond with action...

UU minister, Rev. Tom Owen-Towle has called UUs ‘free-thinking mystics with hands...’ true that...

And here Dorothee Soelle helps us to see how the Holy that calls, and resistance to that which thwarts life work together – they are not separate...

This is how my call social justice works for me...there is no separation between me and the world...all things...all beings...and so how can I not resist that which is death dealing? How can I not use my life for Life!

How could I not say, Here am I! Send Me! I will go if you lead me! And I am always led and sometimes it is to unexpected places...

And in the act of resistance, I experience the transcendent – I am one with everything, and that fuels further resistance, what Soelle identifies as “not being at home in this world of business and violence...” and this leads to dissent... p 197

As Soelle links MYSTICISM AND RESISTANCE she sees it both as inner and outer.

She writes, “I seek to erase the distinction between a mystical *internal* and a political *external*. Everything that is within needs to be externalized so it doesn’t spoil, like the manna in the desert that was hoarded for future consumption.” P 3

Interpreting philosopher Emmanuel Levinas appreciatively Soelle says, “Resistance is not the outcome of mysticism, resistance is the mysticism itself.” P 199.

Soelle inspires me saying, We “...need the inner light of being at one with every living thing and the resistance against the death machine...” What I call “all that thwarts life.”

This is WHAT MYSTICISM and RESISTANCE LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

When Life, the Universe, Love so beautiful as to be almost unbearable, calls and we say Here Am I! Send Me!

“to grow in resistance means also to claim the power that has been given to all created beings.” Soelle tells us. p 204

And this is available to all of us who take seriously what we know about this world...

“It is precisely among critical thinkers in the natural sciences that a new attentiveness is emerging to a domination-free, mystical religiosity.” The nature of our interdependence is indisputable and is also a source of both the call and the answer for me!

“This approach to creation renders ever more questionable the notion of the absolute domination of our species. The anthropocentrism that today endangers the survival of creation and the multiplicity of its species is hostile to nature.”

“Appropriation, domination, subjugation, and use determine the relation to the world of nature and threaten the whole of life on the little blue planet. More and more people sense today that a different spiritual foundation for the earth’s survival is necessary.” – 296

Soelle calls for a “mystical-ecological consciousness that knows itself woven together with all that exists. All that can live and survive only in the coexistence of relationships. This coexistence binds us together with the millions of years of evolution and, at the time, with our grandchildren’s drinking water. It cannot be ignored and no one has the right to foreclose on it.”

Everything is connected and everything is at stake, and when Love asks “Whom shall we send?” Let us answer: “Here Am I! Send me!