

Isaiah 6:6-8
Responding to a Call
ASP Welcome Home Service
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Any other Sunday and today's sermon would be centered on the events of the last two weeks — the disclosures of more than 2000 children separated from parents in less than a month; the eight-minute recording of the cries of terror and fear of some of those children; the national and global outrage and the universal condemnation by religious leaders of every stripe, from the Catholic Bishops to Franklin Graham; also, the public shock and sadness of the four living former first ladies. We would be talking about what all of this happening in the 21st century means, with echoes of slave children taken from their parents to be sold, and Native American children taken from their parents to be Americanized and Christianized.

Any other week, but, pastor, please not this week. It's our welcome home service. We need it to be a celebration of the incredibly hard work that almost 150 of you have undertaken. And it is right and honorable to honor the work that you have done, and the experiences that you have had. I'm so grateful for the stories we've heard today.

Whom Shall I Send and Who Will Go for Us? That last verse is indeed the text ASP has chosen as their theme for this summer. I'm sure their intention was that it would be inspirational for those who were preparing to come to Appalachia and do the work, to remind everyone that you had been called by the Spirit and sent by a loving God to work with, to get to know, to serve alongside people whose life experiences are dramatically different than your own.

But this year, I want to suggest there is a little more there. You see, he was afraid. Isaiah, the greatest poet, the greatest prophet of the Old Testament, was afraid that he had nothing valuable to say. But the coals in his dream were God's promise to burn away anything he said that was not of value. Isaiah was called to proclaim to the elites of Judah, the last remnant of the old kingdom of Israel, that they were not living as God had intended. People in government and the religious institutions were more concerned about their power and influence than actually taking care of people or following God's instructions about care for those who were most marginalized. And Isaiah was to tell them that their narcissistic ways were going to bring the world down on top of them — in the form of a great ruler from the East whose power and ruthlessness would far outmatch their self-indulgent ways.

Isaiah didn't want to do it; he didn't feel up to the task. But in his vision, those coals on his lips were a refining fire. Back then, the only way you could sanitize something was with fire or sunlight. And here the fire of the hot coals in his vision — like burning, red, charcoal briquets — were designed to burn away his fear and his insecurities so that he could be the teacher, the rabble rouser, the preacher, that God was calling him to be.

I want to suggest that the week you just had was your refining fire. For so many of us, we look around and see the problems of the world and they seem insurmountable; they are so much bigger than what we can change. And we feel powerless or just angry, with nowhere to put that anger. But those who have stood in a Kentucky holler and seen for themselves the lack of opportunity, the poverty, the dysfunction without social systems to help overcome it, the lack of options, those who have seen that, and gotten to know the people there, can never again not know. Never again can you stereotype folks from that region; never again can you hear someone crack a joke about hicks or hillbillies and not see the faces of the dear people you came to know and, I'm sure in many cases, came to love this week.

What is the message of this text — Whom shall I send and who will go for us? Is it about this past week or is it about now? How will you encounter the world differently because of the week you've just had? How can those of us who weren't with you, but who now have seen and heard things about our country we never thought we'd see, how are we changed by those experiences? How might those experiences send us out from this past week and this past season of our national story to be different people, encountering the world in a different way?

Hopefully, at the very least, it will inspire you, like Isaiah, to not keep silent. When we see and come to know things that others don't, and when we encounter their ignorance, we have the option. Will we speak the truth we have come to know? Will we share what we have come to know so that others might be enlightened? Can we speak up in the face of untruths and prejudices that we know from our own experience to not be the complete truth? At the very least, I hope and pray we can, so that we are a source of light and not like those who perpetuate the shadows of distortion, prejudice and lies.

But we all know that talk alone is not enough. Talk didn't put in a floor, build a set of steps or a porch; talk didn't put in walls or paint the doors. It takes action. Whom shall I send and who will go for US? It's a question in Isaiah's dream that imagines God looking for people who will carry the divine message of hope, grace, love and truth, not just in what they say, but in what they do.

This week we have seen the power of talk coupled with action — the announcement of the end of family separation and only the beginning of a conversation about what is next for our national policies on asylum and immigration. But it's a beginning and it only happened because people spoke out and stepped up.

I guess that's the real question for all of us after the last week we've lived, whether it was here on the North Shore, in Harlan or Knox Counties in Kentucky or, like me, in St. Louis at the national gathering of our denomination. In response to what we have seen, in response to how we have been changed — will we let that change the course of our lives, even if only a little bit? Have we encountered in the past week a new sense of who we are and why we are called to be who we are? AND will we not surrender to fear about getting involved, but use the last week as

our motivation, as the coals to our lips that burns away our fear and our anxieties, preparing us for the work that lies ahead?

Six years ago, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) voted to hold the 223rd General Assembly in St. Louis this year. Two years later, Michael Brown was shot and killed in Ferguson and the arguments began about why we shouldn't go to St. Louis. We shouldn't spend our money in a community where that kind of discrimination still takes place. "We have to do something" was the consensus, but our convention is not the thing to do, they said. And then, over the course of the many months of protesting, a lot of Presbyterians went to Ferguson and St. Louis to find out for themselves how things were, to burn away the rumors and the bad TV reporting. And what they discovered was that there was brokenness, and there was institutional racism, and there was an unfair judicial system.

But, instead of saying "we won't go there" and "they do bad things there," the leadership of the church started imagining what it would be like to try and make a difference. One of the things folks discovered — that people in Missouri have known about for years — is that the cash bail system in that area usually means that white or middle-class folks charged with misdemeanors usually post bail and go back to their lives while they await trial. But poor people, disproportionately people of color, might spend 18 months in jail waiting to go to trial on a crime that has a \$2000 fine or six months in jail as its maximum punishment. It's why the city and county jails in the St. Louis area are called the work house or the poor house, harkening back to the debtor's prisons of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. So, what we decided to do was put our money and our feet where our hearts are. At opening worship, the offering of over \$47,000 was dedicated to paying the bail of people awaiting trial for non-violent misdemeanors. And on Tuesday, commissioners formed a roughly 1,000-person mini-march from the convention center to the city jail where 36 people were freed from custody to return to work and their families while they await trial. We used what we had come to know to inspire us to action.

Friends, the children are still crying; Appalachia is still ignored and exploited by the powers that be, and people still languish in jails solely because they are poor. But now none of us can act like we can't make a difference because we know we can. That is God's great gift of this past week and God's great calling. In this life, God has no hands but ours, no feet but ours, no voice but ours. And so again, God's question rings out as we return to "normal life" — whom shall God send and who will go out in power and hope on behalf of God and God's vulnerable children? May the Spirit continue to give us the strength to say, "Here we are; send us." Amen.