

Well, this is a story about a nun who ran out of gas and had to walk away to the filling station. Remember when they used to be called filling station and the owner gave her enough gas to get her car started and the only container that he could find, a beer bottle. And as she was pouring the contents of the beer into the tank of her car, a Protestant minister happened to drive by and he stared at her in amazement, stopped and got out of his car and exclaimed, sister, we may have our differences, but I've got to admire your faith. Let's pray together. Saving God, you cast your nets wide and deep to catch our souls and to draw us to safety. We offer our prayers to you this day, O God. Prayers of thanks for every kindness offering to us that lifts us up from being down, being in despair. Some days we offer thanks as well for good news that rescues our hearts and minds from aimless paths and leads us back to you. You amaze us, God. By your strength and the reach of your goodness, may all the world one day be captured by your grace and your love. For we ask it only in Jesus name and for his sake. Amen.

Brian, I thought was going to preach my sermon when he stood up to do the forgiveness prayer. What is God's will for my life? What is God's will for my life? I hope we can each ask that question of ourselves today. It's a question that's often brought to a pastor's study. Discerning God's will and God's call upon our life is very difficult, and it often creates periods of crisis in our life. God's call comes in many different ways and in many different forms and for many different reasons. Isaiah's story, which we read this morning, stands in the tradition of many Old Testament call stories. Moses was reluctant to go before Pharaoh, we know, because he was not an eloquent speaker. Gideon was Test, who tested the Lord with his fleece. Jeremiah, who complained that he was only a youth and Jonah, who jumped on a ship and tried to run away a ship. Those people and many others in the Bible heard God's call and responded to it, sometimes willingly, sometimes most reluctantly. But God's call was persistent. In their lives, each of us is called by God to a life of service, ministry to others. Some are called to the ordained ministry. Heaven helps them is all I can say. Many others serve as officers and church leaders of congregation. This room is full of them. Still others use their gifts in the church and in their vocation. God often calls us to difficult jobs. Many times God's people respond with reluctance and hesitation, either because of the daunting nature of the task or because we question our own ability to do what God is asking. Perhaps we can relate to Isaiah's experience when he realized his sinfulness in God's presence. Who us as sinful as we are, as inadequate as we are, Isaiah as unsure and unfaithful as we are. Isaiah's reaction was immediate and appropriate. He confesses his sinfulness and he receives forgiveness, a forgiveness that frees him for service and allows him to say, here am I, Lord, send me. Isaiah volunteered before he knew what he would be proclaiming. It was difficult to hear. It was difficult for the prophet to proclaim. If he had known what he would be asked to do, would Isaiah have volunteered? Note that Jesus quoted these words of Isaiah when his disciples asked him why he taught people in parables.

The parables you see revealed the truth for people to see and to hear if they could and would. Hearing God's call, then, can involve more than being ready for it to go to work for God. It can be more. Hearing God's call can also mean listening to the truth about God and living our lives in grateful response to that truth. I once chaired a standing committee on ordination and ministerial standing for the American Baptist Churches of New York State, charged with overseeing individuals who were seeking ordination. Not just young people, but many people left mid career to go to seminary and then to become ordained ministers. While much of the committee's work has to do with making sure that the candidates for ordination meet all the educational requirements for ordination in that denomination. The most important task of this committee, it is helping individuals discern her or his sense of call to the ministry. Committees spend a good deal of time in conversation with candidates, hearing their stories of fate, examining their motives for seeking ordination, and trying to help them sort out the difference between being called to a life of service to God and being called to ordained ministry. A common comment we received was, I know I've been called by God. I'm just not sure what I'm

called to do. Well, they just finished four years of college and three years of seminary minimally, and they're asking that question as they come before a council and ordination. We helped spare some people. Many ministers struggle with their call from God. I know there was a time during my ministry that two different individuals from two different areas of the country asked me if I would join their staff. They were not for profit fundraisers and they had heard me preach in my churches, and they said, you can deliver the inspirational messages and we'll close the deal. I said no in both cases, but it was tempting because they promised me a great salary. But that's not part of a call that you share with me. Struggling to discover or rediscover just what it is that God is calling us to. Many church officers and leaders struggle with this same question. Sometimes they doubt that they're ready to do a certain job in the church. Don't let those doubts stop you. Many church members search for ways to serve God in the life of the congregation and in their vocations. I don't like to leave it at church. I want to take it to work.

All of us are called to a life of faithful service when we respond to Christ's call to let down our nets. Perhaps Isaiah's story can help us re-examine what it means to hear God's call. Hearing God's call means recognizing our needs for God's grace and mercy, being open to God's guidance in our lives, trusting God to provide for us as we seek to fulfill that calling. Who knows, in examining this text, we may just be enabled to hear God's call this morning. Whether we're children's age this morning or the eldest person in the room, we may be able and ready to say along with Isaiah, here I am. Lord, send me. A minister shared his friendship with a man whom he shared a passion for trains with, both real trains and model trains. He and his friend met once a week to talk about trains. The friend did not attend church. The minister would faithfully invite him to come and worship on Sunday morning. One Sunday, after many non-committal responses, he showed up in worship and then he continued to attend. And he ended up getting involved in the life of the church. Finally, at one of their weekly conversations about trains, the minister got around to asking his friend, why? Why have you started attending church? What was it? The friend replied that he had read Isaiah 6 about Isaiah's vision of the Lord, where Isaiah said, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne high and lifted up. His train had filled the temple. The friend said, I figured it was good enough for the Lord. It was good enough for me.

Early on in the life of Jimmy Carter, I read more stories. He was apprehensive about visiting people and talking about his faith in Christ. Imagine president that talks with other people about his faith in Jesus Christ. He had a very close friend, farmer friend, peanut farmer friend from Texas, who gave him this advice that I quote. We don't have to worry about the reception we will get. We don't have to worry about the results of our efforts. We'll pray a lot, do our best, and depend on the presence of the Holy Spirit to determine the outcome. Jimmy Carter admits this attitude was foreign to me as someone with a strong sense of personal responsibility, usually determined to accomplish every task I set out to do. The idea of letting God have the responsibility, Carter says, puzzled me. In a phone call with his wife Roslyn later in the week, Jimmy confessed to having no more fears about future visits, no sense of responsibility for the outcome of those visits. He told his wife, I feel our lives are finally in the hands of God. The former president writes, this was the first time I'd ever been able to put myself totally in God's power, becoming completely free and letting the spirit of God take over. Amen. Jimmy Carter had a renewed sense of call in his young adulthood. The scriptures are full of these call stories. Abraham and Moses and Gideon and Jeremiah, Isaiah and Jonah and the disciples and Paul. We need to pay attention to the persistence of God in these call stories. Despite the reluctance and so often is displayed by those calls.

There are two hymns I really love. One is my father's favorite hymn. They're both based. Both of these hymns are based on Isaiah, chapter six. My dad's favorite hymn was **Holy, Holy, Holy**. And that's the hymn that was written in 1826 by Reginald Herbert and many churches still today use it kind of as a call to worship. Praise him. And then there's a slightly more

contemporary hymn written 150 years later, 1981, **Here I Am Lord**, by Daniel Schulte. And this embraces is embraced by many Christians in different denominations as a beautiful affirmation of God's calling in our lives. The hymn expresses the joy of responding to God's call. It exhibits trusting reliance on God to provide what is needed for the task before us. Have any of you ever heard of Harry Emerson Fosdick? Fosdick was the founding pastor of our American Baptist Church, Riverside in New York City. David Rockefeller. David John Rockefeller. John put up the funds to build it, and Fosick was the founding minister. He wrote over 50 books, and he reportedly went through a major depression and experienced God's healing grace in a personal way. He said that he learned more about God through that experience than he did in seminary, saying that he no longer thought of God as some amorphous power, but as a person, as we see revealed in the hymn he penned, which is, by the way, Fosdick was a graduate of Colgate University, and he was still the most famous graduate ever. He wrote *God of Grace* and *God of Glory*. For Fosdick, his relationship with God had become a heart matter and not just a neck on up matter. Faith ought not to be confused with feelings. Faith is the trust and the courage, Fawcett concluded, to get up and to do what needs to be done. Or as Pearl Buck put it, you cannot make yourself feel something you don't feel, but you can make yourself do right in spite of your feelings.

Have you recognized the daily need for God's grace and mercy in your life? Are you open to God's guidance daily in your life? Do you trust God to provide for you as you embrace and seek to fulfill your calling? Whatever it may be, be. May more and more of us be ready and willing to say, here I am, Lord, send me. God's call comes amidst everyday life. You don't have to go away on some retreat to hear it. If you're tuned in to God, God, you'll hear it every day. Put down your nets that preoccupy you and turn your attention to him. Let us pray together. God, you know who we are and what we are. You know our fitness for the tasks life sets before us. You know our readiness for doing your will in the world. Train us to know ourselves as you know us, to see ourselves as you see us. If we exaggerate our worth Forgive us, Lord. Help us to gain a realistic perspective that allows us to do what we can with humility and glad hearts if we underestimate our capabilities. Excuse us. Lord, grant us the courage to be and to do all you intended. By your grace, let us fulfill our callings, faithful in and through Jesus Christ and all God's children. Amen.