"Here I am!...Here I am, for you called me."¹

"Speak, for your servant is listening."²

"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."³

"Here am I; send me!"⁴

The young boy, Samuel, who did not yet know the Lord; the young teenage girl, Mary, who was unmarried; and the man of unclean lips, Isaiah, all responded in similar ways when God called. None of them were particularly special. They weren't great leaders of their people. They weren't rich or powerful. No one outside of their immediate circles likely even knew who they were. Even still, they are called and sent by God. They are called and sent to do difficult work. Samuel prophesies the destruction of his mentor Eli’s family. Mary is called to conceive, bear, name and raise the Son of God. They usher the Word of God into the world.

Isaiah is a man of unclean lips from a people of unclean lips. Even still, he is called and sent by God. The story of Isaiah’s call is a bit terrifying if you picture it. Granted it’s a dream, but it’s still quite scary. Six-winged seraphs are flying around, God is gigantic sitting on a throne with God’s robe filling the temple, and to top it all off, Isaiah has one of those wild-looking seraphs fly at him to pop him on the mouth with a burning, live coal to purify him. So it’s almost a wonder that after all that, when God calls him asking, “Whom shall I send and who will go for us?” He responds with, “Here am I; send me!”

Isaiah is not called to an easy task; he is called and sent to bring hard words to his people. The people of Judah are not looking around. They are not seeing the harm they do to their own neighbors. They are not listening to those crying out from the yoke of oppression.

¹ 1 Samuel 3:4b, 8b  
² 1 Samuel 3:10b  
³ Luke 1:38  
⁴ Isaiah 6:8b
They refuse to see it. They refuse to hear it. They refuse to speak out against it. They would rather believe that everything is all well and good. If it’s not affecting them, then what’s the problem? Isaiah is called and sent to deliver the tough words of what will happen to his people in their refusal to see and hear and stand and speak in solidarity with their neighbor.

If we read the rest of Isaiah 6, we see exactly what Isaiah is called to. When we neglect the rest of the story, we get a nice, somewhat mild call story where God calls a prophet and the prophet is willing without question to do whatever is asked of him. We don’t see how angry God really is with the people. We don’t know what the people have been doing, and why they need a prophet like Isaiah. We don’t see what the consequences of their actions will be. But when we read the whole chapter, God, like a parent when they’re really angry, lets Isaiah and the people have it with a bit of sarcasm that every child dreads to hear their parent deliver.

“Keep looking, but do not understand.”

Turns out, the people will die by refusing to see what is happening in the world around them. If they continue in this way, God will render them completely blind, deaf and dumb so that even if they wanted to, they couldn’t figure out what is happening to their neighbors around them.

The people of Judah chose to believe everything around them was all well and good. Maybe a new, better leader had been chosen who made promises to treat immigrants and outsiders better. So, they didn’t realize that young children seeking asylum were still being held in inhumane detention centers at their borders. They didn’t realize the abuse of children they didn’t know and who didn’t look like them, was killing them too.

When any of our neighbors, when any person, when any child of God is harmed, abused, or suffering under the yoke of oppression and injustice, it doesn’t just affect them, it affects us too. When our Palestinian siblings are the victims of violent
colonization, getting bombed, gunned down and killed in mass by the Israeli military, that kills us too. When Quintin Jones was executed by the state of Texas on May 19, that killed us too. These acts of violence and terror against our fellow brothers, sisters and siblings chip away at our humanity.

German Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller said it best in his 1946 post-World War II poem of confession about his own complicity and the complicity of other clergy and the German people following the Nazis’ rise to power:

“First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a socialist.
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”

Our lives are tied up together. Our humanity is tied up together.

Continue to not see the world around you, continue to not see the destruction, the pain, the violence, God says, continue not to see it and there will be none of you left.

Prophets are called and sent to bring hard words to their people. Isaiah has to go and tell his own people what will happen to them. He is a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips. Isaiah is not innocent in this. He is one of them. He is implicated with his people. He is a participant in and of this established system. Even still he is called and sent.

There’s an interesting literary movement in our passage today: there is a back and forth between prose and poetry. The lines of poetry in the passage, represent divine speech. Poetry (art) is the vehicle of the prophet. Not much has changed from ancient times to our world today—art is still the vehicle of the prophet.

If you know much about me, then you know that I have spent a good bit of time traveling
between Dallas and Greensboro, NC, during my residency, as has my fiancé, Keith. On one of my more recent trips to see Keith in Greensboro, we visited the Greensboro History Museum. This free museum in downtown Greensboro had a special exhibit that we really wanted to see.

Last summer, in the wake of George Floyd’s murder by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, protestors took to the streets to demand justice for yet another Black man unjustly and unnecessarily killed by police officers. In the midst of these protests, shop owners in Greensboro encouraged artists who were part of the protest to use their prophetic voice, to use their art to help people see what was happening, to help people hear what was happening. On the pieces of plywood on shop windows, artists painted murals. As anyone walked down the street, they could see a portrait of George Floyd, the words “I can’t breathe” or “Black Lives Matter” or “Stop killing us.” There was one mural that paraphrased a Martin Luther King quote and said “This is the language of the unheard...can you hear us now?”

The Greensboro History Museum curated an exhibit full of these beautiful, powerful and convicting works of art. As Keith and I walked around these prophetic works, we could hear a track of protest chants playing in the background. As I became immersed in the work of these artists and prophets, I got goose bumps, becoming overwhelmingly moved. Because while I was not on Elm Street where the protests happened and where the art came from, I was still standing on holy ground among the work of the prophets.

“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” God asks Isaiah. But this is a question for us, too. There was no special qualification that Isaiah had that made him particularly apt for this call, other than God calling him. Before God calls Isaiah, we hear Isaiah's declaration that he is “unclean” or rather, he is complicit in the unjust system of his people. So a live, burning-hot coal is placed on his mouth to make him clean. So, really, Isaiah can’t say no to God. There is nothing standing in his way. The coal has enabled him by taking away any reason Isaiah might find to say no.
Similarly, there is nothing standing in our way. There is no reason for us to say no to God’s call to see and hear the world around us; to realize that what hurts our neighbor, even our neighbor on the other side of the world, hurts us too; to stand and speak out with our neighbors who are hurting and crying out. There is nothing standing in our way because Christ has made the way. God sent us Christ in order that we may not become blind, deaf and dumb in order that we might truly see the world around us. God sent us Christ and we are saved. It is in and through Jesus Christ that we are enabled to do the hard work of saying “yes.” In the same way God made Isaiah clean, we have been made clean in and through Christ. In Christ we are a new creation, raised to walk in the newness of life. We are far from alone in this as we walk in this new life in community with each other, the communion of Saints and with the Holy Spirit, who walks before, behind and beside us. So, there really is no reason for us to say “no.”

If I have learned anything about you in these last two years, Wilshire, it is that you are not people who look for a reason to say no. You are willing to do the difficult things. And because of your love, support, encouragement and example, I am better able to go out from this place today to do the same.

Keep up the good work, friends, because just as with the prophet Isaiah, the Triune God has called, sent and equipped us.

So, when God asks us, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”

We can respond, “Here am I; send me!”

Amen.