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Isaiah 6:1-8

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## FOUR, THREE, TWO, ONE: READY OR NOT, HERE I COME!

In case you didn't notice the title of today's message in your bulletin you will find it before you on the screen. Please don't misunderstand. I did not come here to play hide-and-go-seek with you today. Neither am I suggesting that anyone who is surprised to see me this morning is in some way unprepared. And even though these words could have preceded the first advent of Christ, and will still be appropriate when he returns at the end of the age, my choice of words here is not meant to *produce an external announcement* but, rather, to *introduce an internal attitude*.

The image I am interested in conveying is that of a Christian readying himself or herself to do that which he or she will ultimately not be fully prepared to do. Thus the title of today's message is intended to be our words, from us to ourselves. *Four, three, two, one: Ready or not, here I come!*

The Scriptures are replete with examples of reluctant saints who recognized their limitations and sought to excuse themselves from serving. Moses and Gideon readily come to mind, as well as the young and inexperienced Jeremiah. And then who could forget Christ's own disciples before the Spirit empowered them. The truth is that many Christians today feel the same way about themselves. So I would like to address this issue by looking to the prophet Isaiah as I share my own story with you.

<sup>6:1</sup> In the year of King Uzziah's death

I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted,  
with the train of His robe filling the temple.

<sup>2</sup> Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings:  
with two he covered his face,  
and with two he covered his feet,  
and with two he flew.

<sup>3</sup> And one called out to another and said,  
"Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts,  
The whole earth is full of His glory."

<sup>4</sup> And the foundations of the thresholds trembled  
at the voice of him who called out,  
while the temple was filling with smoke.

<sup>5</sup> Then I said,  
"Woe is me, for I am ruined!  
Because I am a man of unclean lips,  
And I live among a people of unclean lips;  
For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts."

<sup>6</sup> Then one of the seraphim flew to me  
with a burning coal in his hand,  
which he had taken from the altar with tongs.

<sup>7</sup> He touched my mouth with it and said,  
"Behold, this has touched your lips;  
and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven."

<sup>8</sup> Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying,  
"Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?"  
Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!" (Isaiah 6:1-8)

At first glance, one might think that these verses have little if any significance for us today. Over 27 centuries have come and gone since then. The great city of Rome was barely a teenager at that time. There was no America and no Romania. The people of Isaiah's day had no satellites, no servers, and no laser surgery. They had no space shuttle, no stock market, and no social security system. What they had was primitive technology and enough time for many gods, whereas our world has advanced technology and little or no time for the one and only true God. The world we live in today lacks a sense

of the sacred and laughs at the seriousness of sin. So what could be more foreign to our modern-day culture than a transcendent, holy God and the antiphonal singing of six winged angels? What could be more foreign to our generation than the vision of Isaiah? I don't have a lot of time to elaborate on this text because we must move on. But I want us to pause for a few moments so that we might *regain* a sense of the sacred and *reiterate* the seriousness of sin, because the goal is always two-fold: namely, to *receive* salvation, and everything that comes with it, so that we can *reciprocate* out of gratitude from the bottom of our hearts. There is, in fact, a simple and straightforward order that fits our countdown here:

Four - Isaiah saw the Sacred One

Three - he sensed his own sinfulness

Two - he surrendered unto salvation and

One - he served his Savior.

These are the necessary first steps to becoming a servant of the Lord. They are our primary preparation, if you will. Everything that follows is nothing less than on-the-job-training. Now let's look more closely at the first five verses, which speak volumes about God's gracious self-revelation and ours.

### I. God's Gracious Self-revelation and Ours Isaiah 1:1-5

<sup>6:1</sup> In the year of King Uzziah's death

I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted,  
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"Woe is me, for I am ruined!  
Because I am a man of unclean lips,  
And I live among a people of unclean lips;  
For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts."

The first thing we notice is that God intervened: God revealed himself to Isaiah. The vision did not come from Isaiah, it came to him. In essence, it was a gift. And even though it was dramatic and distressing, it was a gracious act of God and one of the best things that ever happened to Isaiah.

I am convinced that our story isn't much different. We too start out slipping and sliding through life while making and breaking our own mediocre standards. We want to think we are pretty good people, even better than average, but we can't seem to shake the nagging feeling that something is wrong with us. Then comes the revelation, and instantly we know that we are not just victims of society and circumstance, but rather that we too are willing participants, we too are part of the problem, we too have evil lurking within us. In other words, it is God's self-revelation to us that triggers our own revelation of self. And as I have learned, it happens with dizzying accuracy.

Have you ever been there? Have you ever become acutely aware that you are a person of unclean lips, perverted thoughts, and shameful deeds, with no excuse whatsoever and no place to hide? If so, then you can be sure that you have experienced a holy encounter of the first kind, for this is the work of the Holy Spirit of God. To shake our head, shrug our shoulders and shuffle our feet will only make matters worse.

It happened to me some 24 years ago. Until then I had been doing what one might call “negotiating with terrorists.” For ten years I had been fighting a losing battle, literally staggering from week to week. Then, seeing my doom on the horizon, I resorted to drastic changes in my lifestyle and literally began to sprint. By my 28<sup>th</sup> birthday I was running thirty-six minute 10k’s and three-hour marathons. Obviously I wasn’t the best, but I was certainly above average.

So there I was in 1983, healthy as a horse, making lots of friends, becoming respected and appreciated. I even got my picture in *Runner’s World* magazine. I was really beginning to feel pretty good about myself – until one day in 1984 when I encountered the holiness of God.

I must admit, there was no vision of angels and no altar. There was no throne, no temple, no singing, and no smoke. In fact, there were only a few words spoken by a friend unknowingly. But those words, like Nathan’s words to David, were all it took for the Holy Spirit to bring an avalanche of conviction down upon my soul. There was nothing, absolutely nothing that my healthy body could do to stop it.

There is a verse in John chapter 17 that encapsulates the process I was going through at that time in my life. Jesus was praying to the Father and he said: “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.”

What we need to notice here is that eternal life is not just the result of knowing the only true God. Such knowledge merely identifies our deplorable state while intensifying our desperate need. This is a necessary first step in our preparation but it is of little value if it doesn’t lead us to Jesus Christ. Without coming to know the Savior we simply remain sinners in the hands of a Holy God. And that, my friends, is bad news. So let’s turn to the good news and delight ourselves in the gospel according to Isaiah, God’s gracious act of redemption, in verses 6-7.

## II. God’s Gracious Act of Redemption

- <sup>6</sup> Then one of the seraphim flew to me  
with a burning coal in his hand,  
which he had taken from the altar with tongs.  
<sup>7</sup> He touched my mouth with it and said,  
“Behold, this has touched your lips;  
and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven.”

Isaiah’s experience may sound strange to us but it is liturgy and sacrament at its very best in the Old Testament. The temple metaphors place Isaiah near the altar, but not on the altar, for *grace is in the air*.

The Holy nature of God has been upheld, his burning wrath toward sin has been appeased, the substitutionary atonement has been accomplished, the sacrificial lamb has been slain and consumed by fire, and Isaiah is merely a spectator, because *grace is in the air!* But this amazing grace is of no benefit until it is applied. Thus the Seraphim apply not only the benefits of salvation but also the cleansing necessary for fruitful service. Not only is the past dealt with but the future is provided for as well. One great thing about the one true God is that he ordains not just the crisis of conviction but also the way of escape. Not only does he bring us to despair but he also sends out a ray of hope. The great thing about this God is that after he takes our souls apart piece by piece he puts them back together again the right way, making them healthier than they ever were before. Now that doesn’t mean that we won’t have to serve with a limp, like Jacob. It doesn’t mean that we won’t have secreting, scarred eyes, like the apostle Paul. What it means is that the blisters on Isaiah’s lips, and the marks that we ourselves bear from wrestling with God, have a redemptive value: they are designed to be holy reminders, for the rest of our lives, that we too were there and that God touched us as well. It is our thorn in the flesh, perfectly placed, that keeps us weak and

humble so that we will be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus and boast not in ourselves but in the Lord alone.

The year that followed that moment of revelation was the toughest year of my life. It was like the vision of Isaiah stretched to the snapping point as God reeled me in. Like Isaiah, I experienced helplessness and hopelessness. I was humbled and I was hungry, oh so hungry for a fresh beginning and a clean slate.

In June of 1985, I was riding in the Primavera Century, from Gunn High School over to the coast and back. I remember being all alone up on Skyline Boulevard. It was cold, windy, and raining hard. Looking back, it was just like my life. I had pulled myself up by my bootstraps and worked my way out of the valley to what I considered to be the top of the mountain. But instead of glory there was guilt, instead of peace there was pain, and instead of fulfillment there was emptiness.

Then came the intersection, not only in the road, but in my life as well. Just moments after turning left, while I was descending toward the ocean, I got another revelation. Looking back, it is easy for me to observe that the revelations were progressive. Whereas the first one had buried me, the second one was birthing me.

Like an insurgent thought, “hope in God” took over and captivated my mind. I immediately began surrendering to the vision that God could turn everything around, that the one who made me could remake me. So at 30 years of age and going 30 miles an hour, I began to pray: God, please come into my heart. I don’t know how to fix it. I have tried everything I can imagine and nothing works. If you will come inside and heal me, then I will live for you. Wherever you lead I will follow, no matter the cost, no matter what anyone says.

Obviously I had no way of knowing then that such a short request could set into motion such a long answer, but twenty-three years have come and gone since that prayer. Twenty-three years of responding to grace. Twenty-three years that I will try to share with you in the time that remains.

## III. Responding to Grace Isaiah 6:8

- 6:8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?” Then I said, “Here am I. Send me!”**

Technically speaking, such a prayer meant that I was ready to serve my Savior, but at that moment I was so unprepared. I had heard a few sermons in my life, as well as some essential verses, but I had no Christian friends, no church, and no theological training whatsoever. Of course, these were just minor details for a sovereign God.

I later found out that my older sister, Patti, a fairly young Christian at the time, began praying that God would bring two Christian friends into my life. She was praying from Atwater, California in August of 1985. By October I was thrilled to have those two friends. In November, one of them, who was soon to become Mrs. James Garcia, invited me to PBC Cupertino. Thus in early December 1985 I found myself sitting right over here next to Milann.

There was a time of body-life that Sunday and Milann asked for prayer for her stepbrother. When she finished, I was nudged from within to take the microphone and tell the congregation that I had recently received the Spirit and knew that I was finally home.

So less than six months after my prayer I had already been given Christian friends and a church; all that I lacked was knowledge of my spiritual gifting and some theological training. Enter Brian Morgan. He was in the pulpit that day and heard my declaration. The next thing I knew I was attending one of his Bible studies, and then became a part of his Monday night discipleship group. In short time this led to a trip behind the Iron Curtain and a relationship with Romania’s underground church, also known as the Lord’s Army.

I don’t have time for all the details here, but it wasn’t long before I became aware that I had been caught up in a plan much larger than myself. Against all odds I met Nelly in 1990, and we began to correspond. In 1991, I returned for a visit and we were engaged. Then I was faced with a big question: Where will we live? Until then I had assumed that we would live here, but with the

engagement complete, the time had come to bring it before the Lord. So on the plane coming home from Bucuresti I asked him what to do.

Within just 15 minutes three separate thoughts came into my mind regarding why we should live in Romania. They were so impressed upon me that I never doubted their origin and authority. And then there was the unexplainable peace that followed. So after seven years at PBC Cupertino I was ready to move to Romania and begin my on-the-job training.

Now I should make it clear that I was not sent by this church as a missionary to Romania. The truth of the matter is that all I did was follow the Lord by faith, being conformed to a plan beyond my capacity to imagine and beyond my ability to accomplish.

But let me say this: if conversion had readied me for service, it was my past that prepared me for Romania, at least in one sense. Growing up in Plumas County, near Lake Almanor, I was used to cold, snowy winters. I had worked in a gas station, breaking down logging truck tires by hand. I had worked in the forest, cutting Christmas trees and firewood as a business, and later in a sawmill, before joining the Navy. It was in my past that I learned perseverance and discipline through high school sports, military duty, and the day-to-day challenges that confront an auto mechanic. So from a perspective of doing hard work and sticking with it I was pretty well prepared.

However, in so many ways my past could not prepare me for a teaching ministry. First of all there was a new language to learn and an old Eastern Orthodox Church to comprehend. Secondly, I had never ever led a Bible study, never prepared a sermon, and never used a computer.

But even if those skills were slow in coming, the Lord provided many practical ways that I could serve. Having the only camera in the village, I was regularly called upon to do weddings, funerals, birthdays, and family photos. At the same time I was the first person in our village to have a lawn mower. It is amazing how many friends you can make when you have a lawn mower, or any other tool for that matter. For example, our Home Depot extension ladder has been all over the place, just like my bicycle pump and chimney brush. I have also doubled as an ambulance driver, using our family car. I can't tell you how many people I've taken to the county hospital. What I know is that they have ranged from pregnant women on the verge of giving birth to stroke victims on the brink of death.

I have often marveled at how a practical ministry of deeds well done and a teaching ministry of seeds well sown are meant to go together. I believe it is worth noting that the practical part not only supports the teaching but also strengthens the teacher. Pure sacrificial service done to the glory of God has a fortifying effect on the soul.

The practical side of service tends to bring instant positive results and immediate satisfaction, whereas teaching and preaching don't always work that way. One activity is visible and has completion, while the other is intangible and ongoing. One can be done spontaneously in silence, but the other demands careful preparation and speech. One can draw people to us but the other will undoubtedly turn people against us. That is why deeds of love must break the ice and lead the way.

Permit me to illustrate through our experiences. For many years, Nelly quietly served as a biology teacher in our village. Her pragmatic spirit and no nonsense approach were clearly visible during those years, as was her commitment to righteousness. When she realized that things were going backwards at school because of inept leadership and political corruption, she decided to do something about it and ran for a position in local government. After being elected she built relationships and began to accomplish things at the school, like renovating a dilapidated building to become the new kindergarten. Finally, she became the school principal and drew up projects that were approved in Bucharest so the school got a new roof, new windows, a new heating system and much, much more.

In the process though, she gained outspoken adversaries. A frustrated ex-mayor and the previous school principal teamed up this year to gain control of the mayor's office. Their campaign was full of slander, and they promised publicly that if they won the election, they would replace Nelly. They even paid people to vote for them and promised fantastic rewards to all their

supporters. It appeared that the election might be in jeopardy, as well as the future of the school. So Nelly was moved to action.

I must tell you that I was really proud of her. Just three nights before Election Day she stayed up late and wrote a one-page letter to our villagers in which she simply exposed the falsities by presenting documents that clearly refuted the claims against her integrity. She made no counter attack and no emotional pleas for support, but rather with dignity responded to the accusations. I have never seen our village so united for a cause, with the result being a landslide victory in her favor. Turning to me...

When I moved to Romania, there was what you might call a honeymoon period, not just with Nelly, but also with the church. I knew that there was tension between the traditional Orthodox Church and the evangelical Lord's Army. I also knew that some tensions existed within the Lord's Army itself. But it wasn't until I began speaking around the country that I started to feel that tension in a very personal way.

Some people were warm and gracious, while others frowned and murmured. Some received my foreign accent with interest, while others rejected it with suspicion. Some thanked me personally after sermons, while others subtly challenged me from the pulpit. Some showed appreciation for me in their writings, while others openly accused me of participating in a plan to infiltrate the church with false teaching. Those same people have embraced me in public while denouncing me in private.

So how should I respond to all of this? After thinking things through, I decided to just let the facts speak for themselves.

First of all, several years ago I initiated a project to translate and print a book by a Protestant theologian named Donald Fairbairn, entitled *Eastern Orthodoxy Through Western Eyes*. The book shows much respect for Eastern Orthodoxy, thus earning the right to challenge the church on some doctrinal issues that appear to have been neglected. I wrote a foreword to the book and sent it on to the Archbishop of Timisoara, asking him to read it and write his own foreword of endorsement. Doing so without hesitation, he stated his own conviction that the book would benefit all who read it, Orthodox as well as Protestant.

Secondly, not long after that I received a certificate stamped and signed by the Bishop of Arad, recognizing me as a workman approved of God. It is possible that there was a connection between the book and the diploma, but more than likely it had a lot to do with years of mowing the church lawn and serving on the parish council.

Finally, some three years ago, our village priest asked me to begin preaching on a regular basis during the Sunday liturgy. Now you must understand that this is highly irregular. No priest willingly turns over his pulpit to a layman, and especially not to someone in the Lord's Army. After two years, when I decided to step down for an indefinite period, he repeatedly asked me to change my mind, all the while insisting that I go to seminary and become his assistant.

#### IV. Reflections on Grace

So what have Nelly and I learned through all of this? I have some reflections.

First, we have learned that God is truly gracious and that serving is nothing more than a natural response to what he has already been done on our behalf.

Second, we have learned that saving grace doesn't fuel anxiety or guilt; on the contrary, it provides security and promotes freedom: security, because if we did nothing to gain God's favor then we can do nothing to lose it; and freedom, because if our past has been dealt with and our future has been provided for then we are free to serve out of gratitude rather than guilt.

Third, we have learned that deeds well done in silence can speak volumes about God's goodness. That is to say, they can be living icons pointing those around us to the fact that grace is in the air.

Fourth, we have learned that we can show respect to others without necessarily agreeing with everything they believe. In doing so we can earn the

right to be heard and get our message out to an entire village, if not to a whole nation. Finally, we have learned that we will struggle and make mistakes, that we will have enemies and be misunderstood, and that it is impossible to be fully prepared to serve. But nonetheless, ready or not, here we come. Amen.

I would like to close our time together with a poem that I wrote two years ago after Brian passed through our home. Perhaps you too will be able to relate to the reflections of a man made ready, but not fully prepared, to live and serve in two worlds at the same time.

I am an irony  
I am an ordeal,  
Weak as water  
strong as steel.

Battered and beaten  
flat and cold  
glistening and glowing  
round and gold.

I am a river  
I am rust,  
wet as wine  
dry as dust.

I am a bore  
I am a thrill,  
easy to empty  
hard to fill.

Hunted and hounded  
pushed and shoved,  
admired and honored  
blessed and beloved.

I am a saint  
I am a sinner,  
crawling the race  
chasing the winner.

I am a tortoise  
I am a hare,  
I am common  
I am rare.

Lacking and leaking  
spilt and spent,  
brimming and bursting  
gathered and sent.

I am alone  
I am together,  
embracing the future  
in spite of the weather.

I am an irony  
I am an ordeal,  
weak as water  
strong as steel.

Besought and beset  
round and about,  
calm and collected  
within and without.

I am a metaphor  
I am a poem,  
walking on words  
heading for home. Amen!

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