

Sermon Title: This Much I know is True  
Text: Isaiah 6:1-13; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

February 4, 2007  
Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI  
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It is a source of constant amazement to me that whenever Jesus was pushed to articulate his understanding of the God to whom he pointed with his whole life, and the life of faith he understood to grow as a response to finding the presence of that God in your world, he explicitly avoided using religious imagery. That he *knew* the traditional language of faith was obvious in his teaching, but the true genius of that teaching rested in his ability to take ordinary images, and turn them into vessels of divine truth. The kingdom of God, he said, was like mustard seed—a common weed—turned in his teaching into a powerful symbol of fruitfulness. Jugs of water, set aside for ritual purification, become the new wine of the feast of God’s people. Sheep and goats, shepherds, and women cleaning their houses are the *stuff* out of which he fashions this new reign of God, not by taking his listeners out of the world, but by taking the *ordinary*, and putting it to an extraordinary use.

Think of Isaiah, a young boy, fidgeting away while the grownups all around him attend to the holy duties of temple worship. He was—he admits it—just a kid. If you had been watching the procession into the temple that morning, trying to pick out the *one* who would emerge with a powerful word from God—a word that would endure for centuries and change the course of history—there would have been a whole host to choose from: high priests and attendants, following in procession that alternated between somber and ecstatic. Who would have thought that it would be the ordinary kid, scuffing his feet, arm weary and fingers sore from the grasp of his parents who worried that he might get lost in the crowd? But it’s the way God works, it seems...at least the God who meets us here. Not a God who seeks out that which the world treasures in order to lift it to heaven, but one who finds in the every day that which is of ultimate value.

Think of Paul. A month from now we will have a marvelous opportunity to experience his story in a whole new way, and I sincerely hope you’ll make the time in your life to be a part of this all. There’s not much we know for certain about him, except that he was remarkably unremarkable. There were any number of others who would have been better suited to the role he was destined to play. Begin with the group who had followed Jesus throughout his earthly ministry. Have you ever paused to think that the vast majority of the witness to Jesus’ life, and the church that grew up in response to his call, comes from someone who never met him? Who had to beg and argue to find a place amid the pantheon of Jesus’ successors?

Paul *knew* it. He said as much as he wrote to the church at Corinth. I have nothing to offer you, he said, that wasn’t given to me. There are others who came before me: Cephas, and the Twelve. There were hundreds to whom the risen Christ appeared, and then, “Last of all, one untimely born...unfit to be called an apostle” he appeared to Paul. And it is, more than any other single voice, Paul who shapes the image of Christ that stands at the center of the church’s worship two thousand years later.

One of my favorite prayers from Iona puts it so well: “With the eye of a weaver, you have chosen us—such different threads—to be gathered into unity that the world might believe.” The

work of God in this world is not reserved for superstars, patterned in their genes to an excellence to which none of us dare even aspire. Look carefully at the pages of scripture and you will see folk like Isaiah, and Paul: folk who look remarkably like you and me.

This is not an easy thing to get into our minds in a world that is dominated by superstars. I have a guess that a good many of us will, later today, turn our attention to the Super Bowl, as the two teams that have survived the battles of a long season will face off against each other for bragging rights as football's World Champions. You might want to have in your mind as you are watching that the combined salaries of those two teams run to about \$150 million. And these are pretty much bargain basement teams. If the two with the biggest payrolls had made it to the game we'd have been watching \$212 million worth of superstar athletes squared off against each other. Tally up the salaries paid to all those who had to be beaten to get to that game and it's a whopping \$2.6 billion—twice the Gross Domestic Product of Sierra Leone, to pick a country whose plight we learned something about in this past month.

That's the world we live in—a world of superstars who perform in ways that none of us could ever dream. And it has a way of filtering into every other aspect of our living. You've got to work to get ahead, and if that means stepping on some people on the way so be it. Your kids had best be on the first team. The car we drive, where we vacation, the stores we shop, the labels we wear are the markers by which we can tell whether or not we've *made* it. How exclusive is your club? It's so easy that we just fall into it...pastors, too, who humbly follow God's call, but seem to notice that a genuine call is always to a bigger church that pays more. Bigger is better, and biggest is the best.

“But it will not be so among you,” Jesus says. Greatness in the economy of salvation will be measured in terms of service. The first will be the slave. Isaiah: the young boy who dared to speak back to his vision—“Here I am, send me!” Paul: who was “unfit to be an apostle”. These are the ones through whom God's work is done in this world. So enjoy the football game tonight. Really. Sincerely. The investment in it is far too great for it not to be appreciated. Just don't get confused as to how it is that God's call will be fulfilled tomorrow: it's not the superstars. It's Paul. It's Isaiah. It's you, and me, and all of us together. Ordinary folk, who when taken into the hand of God can do extraordinary things.

It's not the “who” that matters nearly as much as the “how”. And Isaiah and Paul provide striking examples. Neither, you see, were exceptionally creative folk, who cobbled together religious systems, ethical plans, from whole cloth in their own minds. Think about it. What did they do? They listened carefully for God's Word, and then they spoke that which they knew to be true.

Listen. That's a challenge, isn't it? This past week one of the group that I gather with in the Pastor Theologian Program got stuck in a travel snafu. She was coming from Canada, and after three trips out of security and back in, she got noticed by the Immigration folk, directed to a barren room filled with blank stares and hopelessness. She felt awful about not getting out, and worried about what might come of this part of her adventure, but she said the worst part of it was feeling like she was wasting time, and wasting time drives her up a wall. But she decided to try something a little different with this new experience, and make herself *listen* for the voice of God

in the midst of all this. She could report no great epiphany as a result, but realized as she was finally in a cab home to take up the fight another day that she'd learned it was alright to "waste time with God." To listen, not knowing for sure if there is anything to hear. That's what Paul and Isaiah did with such great care—Isaiah in the Temple, Paul while making his way to the next stop on his tour of synagogues to be tormented. They listened when no one else could hear. And for both, an ordinary day was transformed.

Amy Bertschausen shared a book with me in preparation for our conversations last week by Parker Palmer, entitled *A Hidden Wholeness*. Palmer is of Quaker sensitivities, which I suppose makes him a better listener than most, but the book has really gotten me to thinking about how often and easily we mistake our own thoughts, and not always our best ones, as the voice of God. "We know very little," he says, "about creating spaces that invite the *soul* to make itself known. Apart from the natural world, such spaces are hard to find—and we seem to place little value on preserving the soul spaces in nature." But it is just in those quiet spaces that invite the soul that God will speak most clearly to us.

To be God's people in this world we must listen, to ourselves, to each other, to the whispers of the Spirit between us, urging us to see beyond what is obviously there to the possibility that God has planted in our midst. Not just bread and juice, but body and blood—God's true presence, shared with us that we might become that Body in this world.

And then, to speak—not what we think, or how it seems to us. Neither Paul nor Isaiah had a message of their own to give to the world. "For I handed on to you...what I in turn had received..." I can think of few things harder for your poor pastor, who as they say is seldom given to a thought not spoken. Once we've listened, then in fear and trembling, we must speak what we *know* to be true, not because it seems so to me, not because it will bring honor, or success, but because it is the truth that has been laid upon our hearts to speak—because, bread broken and cup shared, though we see nothing, our hearts burn within us.

What do Paul and Isaiah teach us this morning? That God's ways are *not* the ways of this world! That God's Spirit most reliably moves, not in the tempest and storm of the Superstar, but in a still, small voice that speaks to us out of the whirlwind, and then bids us speak that which we know to be true. It is in this most ordinary of ways that the wondrous work of God will be done, in us and through us, not to our glory, but to the glory of God, through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.