

The Call

A SERMON ON ISAIAH 6:1-8

Pastor Charlie Berthoud

September 6, 2026

Reclaiming Our Faith: The Call | Isaiah 6:1-8 | Charlie Berthoud

A new school year has begun, and the kids have new Bibles, so it's a good time for a Bible quiz! I have three questions. (Answers in yellow.)

1. Which of the following is NOT one of the 12 minor prophets in the Hebrew Bible?
Habakkuk, Zephaniah, **Hezekiah**, Jonah
2. How many prophetic books are in the Bible?
5 major and 12 minor
5 major, 12 minor, and Revelation
3 major, 12 minor (Lamentations and Daniel are not prophets)
It depends (on how you classify them)
3. The song "Here I Am, Lord" is inspired by the call of which prophet?
Isaiah, Jeremiah, Moses, Amos

If you haven't already, I invite those of you here in the sanctuary to pick up a Bible (those are the blue books in your pews) and take a look. You can see in the table of contents that the prophets from Isaiah through Malachi, each with a different context, perspective, and teaching.

Today we begin a seven-week series on the prophets, called "Reclaiming Our Faith." More on that later.

Next week our small groups on the prophets begin, and the first chapter of that curriculum is about God's call to prophets. If you want to learn more about the prophets and connect with some good people, I encourage you to join. We have a few zoom options as well.

In today's sermon, I want to reflect on **three call stories**, three times when God called an ordinary person.

The first is the call of **Isaiah**, which comes in chapter six. Before I read it, I want to make sure we notice several things:

- The call of Isaiah is dated in the year of the death of an earthly king, which might be meant to contrast earthly kings with God.

- With the angelic beings in a heavenly temple filled with smoke reminds us of God's holiness, God's otherness.
- The threefold repetition of the word holy might sound familiar; this reading is part of the biblical inspiration for "Holy, Holy, Holy" which is the first hymn in our hymnal.
- Isaiah responds with humility, recognizing his sin and the otherness of God. The angelic being offers cleansing. The scene as a whole seems like a prayer of confession with an assurance of pardon, a proclamation of the good news of God's forgiveness.
- Then the reading closes with the surprise that this holy God needs help.

Listen for God's word from Isaiah 6:1-8.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ²Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³And one called to another and said,

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory."

⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵And I said, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"

⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷The seraph touched my mouth with it and said, "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." ⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

Thanks be to God for the words of Scripture.

As we begin this series on the prophets, we should clarify a common misconception. Biblical prophets are not principally concerned with predicting the future. But they are about helping people and communities find their way again when they have gotten off track, who have lost their way, who have forgotten the call of God.

Often, that means calling to those with political, religious, and economic power to remember the call of God for justice and righteousness.

In chapter one of Isaiah we read:

Woe, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity,
offspring who do evil, children who act corruptly,
who have forsaken the Lord....

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove your evil deeds from before my eyes;
cease to do evil; learn to do good;

seek justice; rescue the oppressed;
defend the orphan; plead for the widow.

The prophets are called in order to call the people (and especially the leaders of the people) to get back on track and to live into a new future, in contrast to the corruption of the current day.

In his classic text *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann wrote about how important it is to have a vision beyond whatever doom and gloom might be happening because of the corruption of people with power.

So the call of the prophet is often to cast a vision in contrast to whatever fraud, cruelty, greed, violence, and/or indifference is happening at the time. Sometimes, that means they call out to the political leaders, and sometimes they call out to the religious leaders. One of the best examples of that is from the prophet Amos, who spoke God's word, condemning the empty ritualism of religious leaders:

I hate, I despise your festivals...
Take away from me the noise of your songs...
But let justice roll down like water
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Religious and political leaders don't generally like being criticized. Being a prophet in biblical times meant having courage to speak up in dangerous situations.

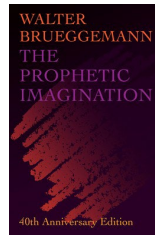
Christian tradition makes it clear that the prophets are vital in our faith.

The Nicene Creed has a section on God's Spirit, which affirms that God has spoken through the prophets.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.

When Jesus was asked what law is most important, he responded that loving God and neighbor summarize the Law and the Prophets.

[Jesus said], 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." (Mt. 22:37-40)



"It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one."

--Walter Brueggemann

Reclaiming our **FAITH** hearing God through the prophets

As tension rose between Jesus and the religious and political leaders of his day, he called them out for murdering the prophets of previous generations, while also foreshadowing his own violent death:

[Jesus said], “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the **tombs of the prophets** and decorate the graves of the righteous.... (Mt. 23:29)

One of the most courageous prophets is the second call story I want to lift up: the call of **Moses**.

NO THEME When we think of Moses, some of us think of Charlton Heston holding his arms up. Some of us know the biblical accounts of the baby in a basket and/or the burning bush.

All of those have value, but sometimes I fear that we miss the most important part of the Moses narrative: he courageously defied the Pharaoh, arguably the most powerful person on earth. In Exodus 5:1, the defiance begins:

Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness.”

Remember, this isn’t a barista asking to go home an hour early. These are slaves, demanding their freedom. Walter Brueggemann opens *The Prophetic Imagination* by focusing on Moses

The radical break of Moses and Israel from imperial reality is a two-dimensional break from both the religion of static triumphalism and the politics of oppression and exploitation. (p. 6)

That leads us to today.

We are looking to the prophets for guidance and inspiration for faithful living in our time, when one could argue that we have a religion of triumphalism and a politics of oppression, to use Brueggemann’s words.

More and more Christians are feeling like their faith has been co-opted and manipulated for political gain. Many members of this community are deeply concerned about this co-opted faith, with what is commonly known as Christian Nationalism.

A group called Christians Against Christian Nationalism has a helpful definition:

What is Christian Nationalism?



“a political ideology that seeks to merge Christian and American identities, distorting both the Christian faith and America’s constitutional democracy.”

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What is Christian Nationalism?



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The flag and the cross should remain separate, but they are being brought together in dangerous ways.

Political and religious leaders are using Christian imagery to

- Affirm the USA as a supposedly Christian nation
- Establish and mandating Christian prayer and practice in schools and government
- Denigrate other religions
- Demonize all immigrants
- Rollback rights for LGBTQ people
- Limit women's rights, with some arguing to repeal the 19th amendment

These positions are being done with supposedly Christian language, despite not reflecting authentic faith of following Jesus—the one who called us to love neighbors and enemies, to seek first God's Kingdom, to serve the lost, the least, and the last.

Several years ago, actor Rainn Wilson (that's Dwight from "The Office") posted a concise tweet several years ago:

"The metamorphosis of Jesus Christ from a humble servant of the abject poor to a symbol that stands for gun rights, prosperity theology, anti-science, limited government (that neglects the destitute) and fierce nationalism is truly the strangest transformation in human history." --Rainn Wilson

Amanda Tyler, the Lead Organizer of Christians Against Christian Nationalism, has written: "Christian nationalism is the single biggest threat to religious freedom in the United States today. It is also an urgent threat to US democracy and the authentic witness of the Christian faith."

Next week the conversation continues with Rev. Angela Denker preaching and teaching here at Covenant. She has done extensive research into Christian Nationalism.

Reclaiming our
FAITH



Guest Author
Rev. Angela Denker

WORSHIP 9:00am and 11:00am
Peace, But First, Truth

ADULT EDUCATION 10:00-10:50am
Christian Nationalism, Violent Masculinity, and the Rise of Online Radicalization

LIGHT LUNCH & CONVERSATION 12:15-1:15pm
Understanding the Rise of Christian Nationalism and Violent Masculinity, and Ways to Push Back as a Community

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Together, we're listening to the words of the prophets, with the hope of reclaiming an authentic Christian faith. I'm hoping we can rediscover the words and life of Jesus.

Here at Covenant we try to maintain a posture of humility and openness and service. We focus on LEARNING God's love and then finding ways to put that love into practice, LIVING God's love.

So Isaiah was called by God and denounced the injustice of corrupt kings.

Moses was called by God and defied the empire of Pharaoh for the sake of freedom.

The third call story I want to ponder today is God's call on each of us.



Jesus began his ministry by proclaiming the good news that God's kingdom is on the way and by calling ordinary people to turn around, change directions, and discover new purpose with their lives.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea, for they were fishers. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people."

--Mark 1:14-18

This fall is as good a time as any for us to make renewed effort to listen for what God is calling us each to do.

May God help us to hear and heed the call. Amen.