

## ***“Here I Am, Lord”***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship on October 25, 2020  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
Text: Isaiah 6:1-8

One of the foundational of concepts of the Christian faith is the whole notion of what is known as “call.” Usually when we think of call, we think of an individual’s call to ministry. Traditionally this would be to what is known as an authorized ministry, like ordination or licensing or commissioning in the UCC. An authorized ministry simply refers to the fact that one so called has had that call recognized by an official body of the church writ large. In the case of the UCC, that would be the regional Committee on the Ministry. The path from “discerning” or personally figuring out that one has a call to ministry of some type is long and multi-layered with all sorts of points along the way where that personal sense of call has to be recognized and validated by others both within the local church where the person is a member and then in the larger structures of the church as the pursuit of authorization proceeds. This journey from the moment one dares to imagine that one might have a call to ministry to the time in the service when ordination is finally conferred is very long indeed. This is quite intentional, and with good reason.

In our tradition, the United Church of Christ, the process usually takes a minimum of three years but often quite a bit longer, depending on the circumstances of one’s individual response to the call. It used to be, say in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, that you would announce your intention to pursue ministry sometime in your teenage years. This could be because you felt the call or because someone else in your family or even your church thought you had a call and pushed you to pursue it. If you decided to do that you would be on what was known as the “4-3-1” track. You would need four years of college studying something like philosophy or history or English or rhetoric followed by three years of seminary and then 1 year of field work in a church where you would be assigned to work under the auspices of a seasoned pastor as a final means of assessing your suitability to ministry. More recently, this track has morphed into something not quite so linear. In the 1970’s, for example, it became acceptable for women to pursue ordained ministry and many did, often as second careers. This

meant they might need a fourth year of seminary if their undergraduate degree was in a field not so readily adaptable to ministry – like being a chemistry teacher for example. They might also need additional field work to build experience in functioning on “the other side of the pew,” so to speak. As women began to pursue ministry as secondary careers, seminary enrollments sky-rocketed and the age of seminary students did as well. More recently, the age of students has dropped to younger ages once again as the church itself has made a conscious effort to nurture calls to ministry in younger people. But, seminary enrollments continued to drop to the point where a number of seminaries have closed or merged with others. Another development in seminary education is the advent of on-line learning and it is now possible to get a Masters of Divinity degree from several schools without ever stepping foot on campus. The world has changed much indeed.

At this same, the need for more effective training in pastoral counseling was recognized, coinciding with churches needing to carry what amounts to “errors and omissions” insurance on their pastors when pastoral care situations go awry. Thus, a requirement for Clinical Pastoral Education as a prerequisite for ordination was instituted in most of the mainline churches (although not the Roman Catholic Church). Even though I went to Divinity School with 20 years of ministry experience, this CPE unit was by far the most challenging part of my preparation for ordained ministry. Truth be told, if you did NOT leave a CPE assignment (this could be at a hospital, nursing home or hospice) in tears at least once, your supervisors would be very suspicious as to whether or not you were really cut out for ministry. I was blessed with excellent instructors so I left several sessions in tears, but each time I was the stronger for it. If you get through CPE successfully, and let me assure you not everyone does, you have the ability to engage with ministry on a whole different level.

I could go in to more of the process, which has multiple steps at the local church level and then at the Committee on the Ministry level, not to mention the rigorous educational requirements of seminary or Divinity School, but that would be beyond the scope of what I want us to think about this morning. I want us to think about the notion of call as we see it described in Isaiah’s vision of his own call to be a prophet which was our

Scripture text for this morning. Call is also what Dan Schutte is writing about in this beautiful hymn which is our focal point for this morning. I would like us to consider together that call as Isaiah experienced it and call as Dan Schutte writes about it are the same on one level but very different on another. Let's begin with Isaiah.

This incredible scene described in Isaiah 6 is one of my absolute favorites in the whole Bible. I know I say that a lot, but this text is just really something uniquely wonderful because it is Isaiah's description of his vision of a personal encounter with God. This theophany – that's what a personal encounter with God is called – takes place in the throne room of heaven. In other words, Isaiah in his vision is transported to God's turf for this personal experience, rather than God making a point of encountering Isaiah in the midst of his own life as he did with Abraham and Moses and any number of other key figures of the Old and New Testaments. Nope, Isaiah finds himself face to face with God in God's house, literally. And to anchor this experience in real time, Isaiah tells us very directly that this whole thing happened "in the year that King Uzziah died." In telling us this, he is telling us this was a one-time thing and it happened at a precise time. And what happened, exactly? Well, he encountered God sitting on God's throne but everything was so ginormous that only the hem of God's robe was visible and it filled the entire space. Also, there were the seraphs, angelic beings entrusted with guarding God's throne. They hovered in the air aided by three pairs of wings. When they sang to God – "Holy, Holy, Holy" – the whole structure shook. Then it filled with smoke. Not surprisingly, Isaiah was terrified because he was sure he was completely unworthy to be in God's presence. "I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips" he says to hovering angels. At this point one of the seraphs takes a burning coal from the altar, brings it to Isaiah and touches his lips, telling him that now he was no longer unclean. This is why when God soon cries out, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?" Isaiah answers immediately, "Here am I; send me."

This is a description of call in the purest sense. Isaiah was literally brought before God, prepared by God's own angels in advance of the call so he could respond, and then when the call from God came, he answered with confidence and enthusiasm. So, it can be no surprise that this particular

hymn is a popular one for ordinations. In fact, Dan Schutte actually wrote it for an ordination of a friend of his who was about to be ordained a Deacon in the Roman Catholic Church. At the time, in 1979, Schutte was a member of the Society of Jesus and was studying theology in Berkeley, CA. His friend asked him to write something original for his ordination which Schutte did with some trepidation because he was recovering from the flu and he received the request on a Wednesday with the ordination scheduled for that Saturday. Nonetheless he said he would and jumped into the work by getting out a blank piece of paper and his guitar. His friend asked for some specific things to be referenced in the song – images of the word of God, the light of Christ and the bread and wine of Communion. Schutte begin with prayer and then started writing. By Friday evening, he had enough of the hymn sketched out that he could run it by his friend who liked it. He also ran it by a group of other young Jesuit songwriters and they gave him one suggestion – To change his original refrain from, “Here I am, Lord; here I stand, Lord” to the familiar self-doubting version we know: “Here I am, Lord; is it I, Lord?”<sup>1</sup>

Schutte still had doubts about the song and remembers very little of his friend’s ordination service except that folks really seemed to like the song. It went on to become one of the most popular of all contemporary hymns. As recently as 2017, the hymn was voted 2<sup>nd</sup> on the list of hymns that make a difference. Schutte has gone on to make composing his life’s work, having received four Grammy award nominations and numerous other awards and recognitions. He is currently the Composer-In-Residence at the University of San Francisco and is also an author and retreat leader. In fact, he has an on line retreat he is running in November through his website, [www.danschuttemusic.com](http://www.danschuttemusic.com), called “Walking the Sacred Path.” Check it out! I think I will!<sup>2</sup>

But, other than possibly taking a virtual retreat with such a well-known and much loved composer of sacred music, what does this have to do with you and me? Well, this is where I’d like us to think about call in a different way than call writ large as in Isaiah’s call to be one of God’s

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<sup>1</sup> <https://americamagazine.org/faith/2017/10/12/here-i-am-lord-little-known-story-behind-catholic-hit>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

premier prophets or even my call and others' call to ordained ministry. I want us to think about God's call as something even more personal, even more basic. I want us to realize God's call to be who God's needs us to be in any given moment comes to each of us every day. Usually, we just don't recognize it or name it as call. But that's what it is. I think Dan Schutte knows and understands this which is why his words in this hymn touch our hearts so powerfully. To me this is especially visible in verse 2: "I have borne my people's pain. I have wept for love of them. They turn away. I will break their hearts of stone, give them hearts for love alone. I will speak my word to them. Whom shall I send?" Dear ones, this is what God asks of each of us every single day. Who will speak God's word of love, of hope, of peace, of justice, to God's beloved people? We all know it's in very short supply these days as the Pandemic rages and this most contentious and anxiety ridden election season creeps slowly forward.

"Whom shall I send?" These were God's words to Isaiah. These are still God's words to us! Whom shall God send to the people in your life, in this church, in this community that we know are hurting and fearful? Dear ones, is it us?? Yes, yes, it is. But, nobody panic! God is not asking us to be profound or pushy or go around ringing doorbells! God is just asking us to pay attention and watch for those moments when we can fully be who God calls us to be to the people we encounter every day. God IS asking us to see the hurt all around us and do what we can to alleviate it. Speak the kind word someone longs to hear. Offer the assistance someone else needs as you are able. Dear ones, watch for those moments when God needs you to step up and do something and do it! Dare to believe God is calling *you* in that moment to bring his word of comfort to the person in front of you. Trust that you are able to respond, that you are capable of being who God needs you to be in that moment when God asks you to be someone else's answer to their worries, their anxieties, their fears in the moment. God is able to use anyone, any time, to accomplish God's plans in the moment. Why shouldn't it be you? No good reason I can think of... Amen.