

“On Purpose”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

May 26, 2024 - Trinity Sunday

[Isaiah 6:1-8; John 3:1-17](#)

Happy soggy Memorial Day weekend! I hope that the rain doesn't spoil any picnicking or other outdoorsy plans that you may have today or tomorrow. Rain or shine, I hope that you are able on this holiday weekend to remember and honor those whose calling was to serve in our country's armed forces and who gave in faithfulness to that calling what Abraham Lincoln called their "last full measure of devotion," offering their very lives to serve their neighbors. As we remember the lives of those who gave all for others, we are moved by gratitude to thank them for their sacrifices, we offer God our thanksgiving for giving us such living examples of selfless love, and we pray that we would be inspired by the gifts they've given to be so loving and giving ourselves. While I hope that none of us here are required to make the ultimate sacrifice as those we remember and honor did, I do hope that we follow in their good path of giving of ourselves for the good of one another, our neighbors, and the country we live in together. For serving God by serving one another in love is our highest calling, our purpose -- always, rain or shine -- no matter the other aspects of our identity.

For some of us, God's purpose for us to serve in love may lead us to dedicate ourselves to speaking or otherwise communicating messages of God's liberating love to people experiencing any kind of bondage. Such was the case with the prophet Isaiah, as we heard in our first scripture lesson, which told us that he had a vision in the year Judah's King Uzziah died, around 740 BCE. This was a perilous time in Judah, for they were surrounded by enemies, dedicated to their destruction, who threatened them and would soon begin to advance upon them. In that dangerous moment, Isaiah was given a vision of a heavenly throne room, which resembled those of the kings of Judah, but was well beyond the grandeur and majesty of even the most opulent of their or any other human throne rooms. It was in this loftiest of places, full of God's glory, the worshipful sounds of God's angelic attendants, and the pleasing smells of sacrifices and incense, that Isaiah envisioned God the Creator, though beyond all created things, including humans and their world order, preparing Isaiah to serve the leaders and people of Judah

by delivering God's words to them. Isaiah's heart and mouth were made clean and ready for this service by a purifying, burning coal, and then Isaiah responded to God's request for someone to go and serve by exclaiming, "Here am I; send me!" Having been made ready for service and then responding to God's call to serve, Isaiah was indeed sent to the leaders and people of Judah in their tumultuous time to faithfully live out his calling by proclaiming to them God's word, even when that word was one of judgment *against* the people and rulers of Judah.

Our gospel lesson from John tells us of another calling event, this one taking place almost 800 years after Isaiah's envisioning of God's heavenly court. In this reading, we heard about a conversation between Jesus and a Pharisee named Nicodemus, who would have been highly esteemed by the people as one of their religious leaders. Though being a lofty person, Jesus called for him to become like a baby, to be born again, being made new in spirit. Jesus went on to say that it was his own purpose to give of his life so that Nicodemus and all others who would trust in him could be made new in spirit and purpose and so be saved from lives that lead to destruction.

This message to Nicodemus was, of course, really delivered to the community that first received this book we call the gospel of John, but it was a message that they and other followers of Christ recognized as being God's message to them, that they, like Nicodemus, were all being called to be made new in spirit, to embrace a new purpose as a follower of Jesus, to live lives that do not lead to destruction, but that are full of God's eternal life. We also receive this calling to continually be made new, to so trust that living in Jesus' life-giving way of love will lead us to experiencing more of God's life that we intentionally seek to move away from selfishly serving ourselves and live instead in ways that serve others and help life to flourish in them.

But will we heed this call to give, to make selflessly giving our own purpose? Will we be like Isaiah, eagerly responding to God's call by exclaiming, "Here am I; send me!" What if being made new means we need to change some part of our identity? Or what if we sense God's Spirit moving us to face in an unfamiliar direction or one that seems less safe than the directions we prefer to move in? What if being made new means we adjust how we give financially to support the

church and other organizations that promote the flourishing of life in people? What if becoming new means we deepen our commitment to participating in the life of this community of faith? And as a church, will we be faithful to God calling us to move in new and unfamiliar directions? Will we be open to going where God's Spirit is leading us today?

I hope that we, as individuals and a 295-year-old community of faith, will eagerly accept whatever new thing God is creating in us and through us. May God's new purpose for us be the purpose we embrace for ourselves, so that, through our living, God, who as our loving Parent formed us and the good world we share, who showed us in Jesus Christ the divine way of living in love with one another in the world, and whose Spirit is calling, empowering, and guiding now, would be praised. Amen.