

Isaiah 6:1-8
John 3:13-17

ON A MISSION FROM GOD
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We will soon commission members of the 17th annual Mexico Mission Team. They're being sent, by this church, and more importantly, by God as a witness to God's gracious love in the world. But I want to take a moment to look at scripture and be reminded that all of us are sent, indeed, as we are involved with God's love we cannot help but be sent.

At first glance, these two passages may seem to have very little in common. One is a picture of God in heaven, terrifying in His absolute power and holiness; the other contains some of the most well-known words in scripture, the comforting message of God's gracious redemption in Jesus Christ. "Woe is me!" and "For God so loved the world" may seem to have nothing in common, but I believe they hold the very same message for us; complementary passages about what God has been up to since before time began. They are passages that both point powerfully to the missional nature of God; to the God who is always sending, always moving outward in love. These passages paint a picture of what it means to be sent on a mission from God, whether we're sent to Mexico or to our next door neighbor.

To understand what that mission is, we first have to understand who God is in God's own self. So let's look at what we know about the inner life of God. Who is God when the world isn't watching? Who was God before the world was around to watch? Well, God is Holy. God is perfect. God is powerful, and pure, and good. God is life and light and joy and peace. God is completely satisfied in God's own self. God is eternally Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is eternally in relationship; three persons, one God. The Greek word used to explain the Trinity is *perichoresis*. It means, literally, to dance around in time together. It describes the Father, Son and Holy Spirit sharing in the same dance, but with their own steps, always connected but always individual, always circling one another and giving to one another as together they share the dance.

I know that the doctrine of the Trinity is far from easy to understand. I actually find great comfort in that, after all how amazing would God be if we could really explain Him with a couple of easy catch-phrases and fancy words? The important thing to take away from this is that God was, and is, complete without us. God didn't need us for company. God had better company in God's own self than we will ever be. Look back into the beginning of time you won't find God twiddling His holy thumbs in eternity saying "Gee, am I bored. Maybe I'll make heaven and earth today." God wasn't somehow lonely in the eternity of His heaven. God didn't have to have us to worship Him, didn't somehow hunger for our praise and just wouldn't be fulfilled without it. God did not need us. And yet, God chose us. God chose to open up the circle of His eternal dance and make space so that we could dance with Him.

You have to wonder why. Why would God want to make us? Why would God want to give shape to a creation that He knew would betray Him and turn away from Him and cause Him pain? We sort of take it for granted that we are here, but God didn't need to create at all. God, infinite and all powerful, Father, Son and Holy Spirit could have remained just as he was in perfect bliss.

Creation is Grace. When God created the heavens and the earth, God was giving a gift of Himself, wanting to share what He had, His goodness and love, with someone other than himself. God was “pleased” to create, to share His own goodness with His creation. And so, from nothing, God formed creation. God formed humanity and said “Here, I want you to share in my life. I want you to share in the joy I have. I want you to be part of my eternity. I want you to dance with me.” In total freedom, God chose to form creation as an overflowing of His own love. God chose to shape humanity as the crown of that creation. And God chose to invite humanity to take an active role in caring for that creation, to participate in the creative act by caring for creation.

I think the closest way I can come to explaining this free love is the choice of a couple to become parents. Julie and I were married for almost five years before we adopted Imani. We didn’t need children. We certainly wanted them, but we didn’t need them. We were pretty happy just the two of us. In fact, it was that happiness in part that encouraged us to start a family. We wanted to share what we had. It wasn’t out of need that we adopted. We didn’t have to. We wanted to. It was an outgrowth of our love for one another.

I mean, when you think about it, how many young couples say, “You know what our life is really missing right now? Someone to throw up on us... What we REALLY need more than anything else is someone to wake us up repeatedly all night long, someone to cry, eat and provide us with lots of really stinky diapers.” And that’s just the beginning. It’s not easy being parents. Sometimes it seems like parenthood is an ongoing exercise in self-sacrifice.

We don’t NEED to have children. We don’t HAVE to have children. It costs us to have children. But we want to have children. We are pleased to have children. I think it’s a part of our reflection of the image our God and Father. From the beginning of time, God has been reaching out to the world in an expression of His love. He didn’t need to, he didn’t have to, he wanted to. His mission is a reflection of His love, of His own self-giving nature. And we’re cut from the same cloth.

And the result of God’s creative love? Well, the church has told that story a thousand times. The result was sin, rebellion, turning from God. The children looked back at the Father and said “We don’t like your music, we don’t want to be a part of your dance. We’d rather run off and be miserable by ourselves.”

And God’s response? God could have, once again, in perfect freedom gone back to His eternal dance; just wiped the slate clean and been content in Himself. God didn’t need save us any more than God needed to create us in the first place. God is still God, the Holy, Almighty, Perfect God.

But God’s nature is one of self-giving love. And that love is intense, perhaps even terrifying. God’s love is powerful and tenacious and unending. God wasn’t content to let those he had loved run away, any more than a parent would be content to let a beloved child slip away. And so God continues His mission into the world, his single-minded goal of pouring out His love on His children and inviting them in to the life that He has prepared since the beginning of time. It’s a goal that will not be defeated or overcome, it will not be side-tracked or short-circuited. God’s love will find its target. Period.

So there's a short summary of who God is, with a reminder of who we are. So what does that tell us about what it means to be sent on a mission from God?

First, God doesn't need to send us on the mission. Really. He doesn't need us. Look again at the description in Isaiah. Here is God in all His power and majesty. What could God possibly need from this prophet? Anything? Is the God, at whose feet angels fall prostrate, covering their eyes from His glorious love, angels who themselves are so glorious, so holy, that man may not look at them without terror, is that God in need of the prophet's help. Does God say, "Boy Isaiah, I am really glad you are here. I'm in a jam... I really need you to go speak for me." God can accomplish His will with or without our help. The message and the mission remain God's. So why is Isaiah there?

Same reason we're here. Same reason creation is here. God chooses, in freedom, to let His love overflow, not just TO unworthy recipients, but THROUGH unworthy recipients. God is pleased to take us as we are, unclean lips and all, and offer us the chance to be key participants in His amazing plan of redemption. And as we take part in it, we also begin to own it. We get excited for what He is doing and are fulfilled in doing it. We start to seek ways of expressing God's love with those around us, of leading them to a new life.

I remember when I was just a little kid helping my dad in his workshop. He was building some wooden toys and I wanted to help. He didn't need my help, in fact I was probably more in the way. But he was pleased to have me help. He made space for me. He found things for me to do so that I could be part of his project with him. I still remember it clearly, even though it was 30 years ago.

Just this past week I was in the back yard building a trellis. I'm nowhere near the woodworker that my father is, but I learned enough working at his side that I can do the simple stuff at least. I learned enough that I'm not scared of attempting a project on my own. As I was working, Andrew came out to join me. He brought his little plastic hammer so that he could help too. I did the work myself, obviously; there's not much a three year old has to offer in the construction department. In fact for a good portion of it I had to work while he clung to my back like a monkey. But he took part, and we had a special time talking and bonding. He owned the project and now has some pride in seeing his work standing in the back yard with a rose climbing up it. Perhaps someday he'll teach his son how to swing a hammer.

The message and the mission remain God's, but God is thrilled to share them with us, to send us so that we too can get excited about what God is doing, can own it more fully ourselves and can pass that enthusiasm along.

The second thing about being sent on a mission from God is that we are not sent alone. I don't just mean we are sent out as a group (though that is true... just look around you at all the people that are also sent) but that we are sent not just from God but WITH God. When God asks "Who will I send and who will go for us?" He already knows the answer. The question is for Isaiah's sake, so that he can own his own sending. But since the beginning of time God the Father has been sending His Son for us, and both the Father and the Son have been sending the Holy Spirit for us. You will never be sent without Jesus at your side. You will never be sent to a place or to a person where the Holy Spirit hasn't already been active, working to prepare for your coming.

The third thing is that all who encounter God are prepared and then sent. All who encounter God are given the chance of participating in the same work that claimed them. Isaiah is sent, regardless of his shortcomings. The disciples encounter God in Jesus and are sent. Nicodemus (the Pharisee who comes to Jesus in the middle of the night in John 3, the one these fantastic words are spoken to) is sent... he appears again in John 7 defending Jesus before the Sanhedrin and again in John 19 where he reappears to anoint Jesus' body for burial. Now God doesn't always have to say "GO, I send you." Sometimes they are sent just out of sheer excitement at being a part of the movement of God in the world. Because they encountered the one who was sent, they are themselves propelled into the world.

Finally, being sent on a mission from God means being sent in love to all the world to bring nothing less than LIFE itself. The message that Isaiah was asked to proclaim was not always an easy message. Love isn't always easy and sometimes leads us to places of discomfort. God's love sometimes means God's discipline. But ultimately that message was of love and reconciliation. The book of Isaiah contains some of the most beautiful, hopeful words in the Bible, not just for the people of Israel, but for all nations. As Jesus reminds Nicodemus, God so loved the world, that he sent his Son.

The nature of God is that of self-giving love. We are invited both to experience that gracious love as we join in the dance of God and to share that gracious love as we invite others to join in the dance as well. Ultimately it doesn't matter how good or how effective we are. Ultimately what matters is that we let God guide our steps. Before time began God had the tune and the steps worked out, it is up to us merely to tune our hearts to resonate with His. We're on a mission from God and that mission is no less than to bring new life to the world.

I understand that we sometimes stand in the pulpit and throw out general ideas without giving you a way to really connect. Today is different. I have a list, admittedly a short list to start with, but a list that will grow over the coming weeks and months, of ways that you can be involved in the outpouring of God's love in the world. Some bits may seem small, some out of your reach. But I would challenge each of you to look at the list and, more importantly, look at your heart and see how God is calling you to be involved with His ongoing mission. If you already have a sense of your mission, great! Keep up the good work knowing that God is faithfully working in and through you. If you don't, then find out what it is! To Christ be the glory!