

**Where God Stays**  
**January 19, 2014**  
**By Pastor Laura Hehner**

From the words of the prophet Isaiah:

(Isaiah 49) Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me. 2 He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. 3 And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." 4 But I said, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God." 5 And now the LORD says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and my God has become my strength-- 6 he says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." 7 Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, "Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

I wanted to read this piece, today, because it in no way is something to include in the sermon, but it's the heart of it. The point of it.

Today, in this season of Epiphany, before the beginning of Lent, we're beginning a sermon series on what it means to be in the service of God;

And I have to tell you, when I read these words, my eyes filled with tears.

My throat tightened. And I wanted to read them because I could have written them myself!

(A lot of it, at least!)

And I know I'm not the only one...

...As we talk about being in ministry for God, anyone who's stood up---

---put themselves at risk. Gave up easier, more normal moments---

---to speak about the beauty and love of God in this life---

--we've all been there! In this place the prophet stands as he says these things...  
Each of you, as Christians, are called into the same holy ministry, and each of us here,  
Face both the excruciating sense of pain and defeat in that ministry,  
as well as the overwhelming relief of the love of our always-present God, through all...  
... just what we need to get through, and remember the worth of the cause  
behind what we're blessed to even just *try* to do.

Today we'll begin opening our minds, and especially our *souls*,  
to some of these feelings and thoughts that come as we work for God.  
In whatever form of ministry you've been called to in your life---  
--and none of us in this room are excluded, here.

As Christians we are all called to ministry.

We are all led by God to *speak* for God sake, and *walk* for God sake, and *do* for God sake,

whatever ways we can, whenever we can, wherever we might find ourselves.---

And as Christians---as people who live for God---

We'll be opening our hearts to some of the *struggles* we go through,

as well as the unspeakable peace and relief

we find in the ever-guiding, ever-loving presence of the holy.

We'll talk about some of the *self-doubt* that fills us,

as we are constantly startled by the doubtless reality of God all around us.

... This is a good thing for us to consider, just after last Sunday,

when we remembered that precious moment  
we experience with God in our baptism,

And just before this season of dedication and meditation, come to us during Lent.

...It's something to consider as we do our best to gird up the strength  
to enter into a new year of speaking and walking and doing,

...All the while hoping God will work through us to do whatever is right and best  
to help others feel God inside of them and around them, too.

...It's something to remember as we're faced  
each day with all of the challenges that lie ahead of us,  
and that rushing feeling that washes through our heart  
as we watch God work in miraculous ways right in front of our eyes,  
and (when we're lucky), sometimes through our own hands and mouths.

And it's good for us to do this, because this road we walk in ministry,  
it's a rough one. A lot of times it's not pretty.

And a lot of times it's the most beautiful thing a human being can be blessed to see.  
A life of ministry is complicated, and confusing, and refreshing, and enlightening...

It's full of the darkness of fear broken by the light of the love of the God.

And it's a journey we *all* share, even if in our individual ministries,  
we walk different ways, and talk different ways, and do different things.

So let's get into these words from Isaiah.

---These words which are our words.

The words here between Isaiah and God, I hope they ring a bell in your own mind,

And if not, just talk with God a little longer,

and you'll hear the same conversation transpire in short time.

They brought me back to that first night I told Matt Neely---one of the pastors

at the church I'd been attending---that I'd been called to ministry.

I remember it was dark outside, and we were sitting just under a bright orange light...

(all of the street lamps are orange in Houston, to keep the humungous bugs away)

... And I remember the look that came across his face. It wasn't *happiness*, gotta tell ya.

Not at all, actually! It was more the look that might cross someone's face

right after you tell them you think the tall bridge

overlooking the ravine might make a good diving board!

He looked at me, and he said,

"I'll tell you the same thing my minister told me, when I was called..."

He said, "...If you can think of anything---and I mean *anything*---

---else in the world you'd rather do, than be a minister, you should do that."

Still very young, I remember being startled that he wasn't pleased.

But his lack of excitement didn't seem to have anything to do with *me*.

It was more like he was looking at someone

filling their backpack to join on a long, tough journey.

He went on to explain. He told me that ministry requires our full heart.

And the absolute surety of an un-doubtable call.

Because it will take you places you won't want to be.

It will show you things you never wanted to see.

It will strain your senses---your heart and your mind---

---and take a toll on the very life inside of your body...

...because of the deep places we wander

into the life of others as we follow God's call to love.

And you need to have full faith in What guides you there, in order to keep going.

From the first verses of Isaiah ch 49:

The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me.  
 2 He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made  
 me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. 3 And he said to me, "You are my  
 servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

As servants of God, as truly called people of God---

---whichever way that call asks us to go

(whether it's as clergy, or as a leader in sharing and studying scripture,

or as a Stephen's Minister, caring for the sick and dying,

or as a community servant, bringing aid to the homeless and needy,

or as a leader for the youth, helping to guide young lives

into fresh and meaningful spirituality)---

---we're called in a way that doesn't leave us much choice in that matter at all, aren't we?

We might try to turn away from it. Deny it.

Run as far as we can, but it just keeps tugging if we do.

And the further away, the more powerful the tug, right?

When we're called into God's ministry,

we are left with a strange and unsettling knowledge, just like Isaiah,  
that this is somehow something God made us to do,  
and we fall into those motions as willfully as we follow our urge to sleep and eat and  
drink.

No matter how absurd it sounds. No matter what we have to give up to do it.

For me, Matt wasn't the only one I talked to about the call I'd received, of course.

I also went to sit down with one of the female Methodist pastors, down in Richmond.

And wow! The response was certainly no less grim! Even worse, actually!

I remember I was sitting in her office, her desk piled high with papers.

She looked so worn!

And she said to me, "If God called you to be a minister, there's nothing you can do, but  
do it."

Started positive...but then she went on:

"But let me warn you, it's a very lonely road. When it comes to people, anyway.

...And especially as a woman.

You'll never feel so alone," she said. "And when it comes to men, forget about it.

If you meet a guy after becoming a minister, they get scared away."

These were her exact words. Trust me, they burned into my mind.

(...Pretty grim. Especially to the ears of a seventeen year old girl.)

Then her face brightened. "But you will have God with you, always.

That company will be sure, and it's all you'll ever need in this life."

"You'll feel tired, you'll feel worn, you'll be underappreciated,

you'll feel over and over again like you want to give up....

But you won't, because God will take you by the hand and keep you there,  
by God's side all the way."

And yes, she was right, in a lot of ways.

Isaiah 49, verse 4:

4 But I said, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God."

In your own ministries, how many times have these thoughts come to your mind?

As we toil over sermons, or bible lessons,

or agendas for committees or focus groups,

How many times are we overwhelmed with a sense of self doubt....

As we look into empty pews or empty chairs;

As we pass out words of hope on pamphlets or cards that will only be thrown away;

As we give and give again, and at the day feel tired, and emptied...

...As we hand over our time, and our abilities, and all of those moments

we might use to gain more money for our bank accounts,

Or food for our stomachs, or entertainment for our minds,

Most times, if you do it right, unacknowledged for that giving...

Sometimes even ridiculed by harsh minds and mouths for what you do...

And how many times in all of this, are we washed over with the peace of God, past all...

.... Knowing that no matter how tired we get.

No matter how little we're appreciated, no matter how much we lose in all,

that our cause is with God---that Holy One Who is All Things---

and in having God we have more than we can ever hope to gain anywhere else,

doing anything else---

How many times in feeling the exhaustion that comes with ministry,  
are we lifted back up and enlivened  
with the reward that is the company, and guidance, and love,  
of that One Holy Love that cares for us and carries us all the way.

God puts us in some really scary positions, right?

God leads us into some deeply awkward moments.

Offering prayers and holy communion to a cancer patient  
only hours away from passing on...

... for those blessed to be a part of those moments, it's scary and humbling.

Lending a shoulder to someone after a failed attempt at suicide.

You're certainly being asked to do something you feel you have no ability to do.

Standing and talking to a homeless person

about the poor services they receive at their shelter...

...makes you feel like a schmuck for ever complaining about a thing in your own life.

Teaching people about scriptures which even the scholars have multiple interpretations  
for,

and feel doubt over which words are valid and which are lies...

...that one will definitely make you feel like fish trying to play basketball.

But nonetheless, God calls you to those moments,

and there's nothing you can do but do it.

And in this doing, no matter how little you're appreciated.

No matter if a single other soul notices where you've just been,

As Isaiah said in verse 5: You are honored in the sight of the Lord---  
---that One who sees and hears all things---and your God has become your strength.

To the people who serve the soul of God by serving others, God says through Isaiah:  
I will give you as a light, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

And there's no task, no job, no effort we can ever be more blessed to be a part of, than this.

[PP]

As we close up today, I'd like to invite you to  
read through the words of the gospel of John, [our liturgist] read earlier.  
Not now, but whenever you can find a second to be still in the peace and quiet of God.  
And in this reading, to meditate on the ways we hear God calling,  
and the ways you move forward to follow that voice speaking to your soul.

Just like in Isaiah, the words speak so clearly of what it means to give yourself to God.

They remind us that when you're called by God  
to help bring others to feel God, to see God---to know God---too,  
It's an automatic yes, even if you say no.

And that call to ministry is an unspeakably scary,  
but unimaginable beautiful moment between you, and the Life that made you.

It's a privilege and commitment which will lead you through some tense and frightening places,

But through all, God will show you breathtaking things  
you never thought you'd be so blessed to see.  
And in every step, no matter where you go---  
---those scary places and those humbling places---God stays *with you*,  
Lifting you up when you fall, holding you close and loving you when you feel alone,  
And rekindling that fire in your heart over and over again,  
so that through you, God's light will touch from one life to another,  
Warming this world and shining past the darkness  
so that others may see the glory of God before their eyes.  
Amen.