

“The Cost of the Call”

Isaiah 6: 1-8

June 3, 2012

Carbondale Community United Methodist Church

Melanie Dobson Hughes

Introduction—before reading of scripture!!!!

Today our scripture comes to us from the book of Isaiah. Isaiah is prophetic literature in the Old Testament. It contains visions, often changes style and mood, and can be quite difficult to read. Isaiah offers a rich and complex landscape and invites into a world different from our own. Hear now the reading from Isaiah 6—a vision of the calling of a prophet.

I. The Cost of the Call—Katniss in the “Hunger Games”

A story set in post-apocalyptic America has captivated the attention of youth and young adults—and their parents-internationally. In this story the Capitol of the country Panem, filled with self-absorbed and vain people and a brutal dictator, reigns over twelve districts. The Capitol plunders the resources and the labor of the districts while they get ever richer (sounds like another Capitol we know). Every year the Capital holds a Survivor-type extravaganza, in which two youth from each district from ages twelve to eighteen compete. Broadcast on national television, these twenty-four chosen youth fight against each other for survival in a contrived arena. The battle continues until only one youth is left alive. The Games function for the Capital as a form of social control over the oppressed people in the districts who live in dark days. The main protagonist of the story, Katniss Everdeen from district twelve, volunteers when her sister is chosen during the ‘reaping.’ Readers follow the story from her point of view as she journeys to the Capital and engages in combat in the arena.

(Who knows the name of this story? How many of you have no idea?) This story, called *The Hunger Games* by author Suzanne Collins has become an international bestseller and a blockbuster movie. The main critique of the book/movie generally involves a horror at kids-killing-kids as reality-type entertainment. However, as one (NPR) commentator pointed out, kids kill kids all the time in our world—in the drug cartel wars on the border of the US and Mexico, as child-soldiers in unrest in the Congo and Sudan. . . and one might also say in the deserts of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The worldwide fascination of young people with this story isn't with violence of teens murdering teens; they've grown up in a culture in which this is simply the norm (current teenagers don't remember a time the US hasn't been at war). Rather, the popularity of the *Hunger Games* series stems from a young person—in this case Katniss Everdeen—making a difference in her world. Jennifer Lawrence, the actress who portrays Katniss in the movie, said she decided to take the part because of the power of one person to stand up for what is right.¹ This generation of youth are drawn to another young character who resists forces of evil in her government, who shows great courage in standing up for her people—but who also seems real and struggles with the calling placed upon her to overturn injustice.

A large part of the draw of the books of the *Hunger Games* trilogy for young people is watching Katniss as she grows from a Hunger Games contestant into a rallying symbol of resistance—a Joan of Arc—for the oppressed 99% in the districts. At first, when she volunteers for her sister, she exposes the brutality of a regime that sacrifices its own children in the name of social control. Yet even in that courage she shows woe—she cries as she leaves her family for the Games. She knows her own eminent destruction lies before her. She's not sure, even with her life of living hand-to-mouth and hunting to provide for her

¹ National Public Radio, “interview of David Greene with star and director of *The Hunger Games*.” www.npr.com accessed on May 29, 2012.

family, that she is prepared. Her triumph in the Hunger Games and act of resistance at the end solidifies that this coal-miner's daughter is prepared. Her people deem her ready to serve. She struggles through the second book of the trilogy to accept her calling as the mockingjay—the symbol of resistance. By the third book, she has accepted the call. She steps forward at great personal cost to serve her people and lead them to freedom. Her riveting journey into the courage required to be a leader keeps readers and moviegoers spellbound.

II. The Cost of the Call: Isaiah

Our text for today holds a much, much older story of a young person called to make a difference on behalf of his people. For Isaiah, son of Amoz, living in the eighth century BC, the days are dark indeed. His people of Judah, who live in Southern Kingdom of Israel, dwell with fear of imminent attack from the Assyrians in the north. Their own fellow Jews in the Northern Kingdom have partnered with the kingdoms of Samaria and Damascus to battle against Assyria and Judah in the Syro-ephramite wars. Isaiah and his people, like Katniss and the people of the districts, have lost their independence and live everyday under threats of attack and oppression by another capital. In the year 742BC in which our story today takes place, great fear and uncertainty dwell in the hearts of the people. Isaiah retreats to the only place where he can find comfort and a feeling of security---the Temple in the heart of Jerusalem.

When he steps upon that sacred threshold for a time of worship, he finds himself instead surrounded by the meeting of heaven and earth. Smoke from incense fills the sanctuary. God's very presence fills the room like a flowing, white robe. Mysterious six-winged creatures with bodies that undulate like serpents float above the throne of God.

Then the strange seraphs begin chanting, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” More smoke billows about the sanctuary.

Isaiah is deathly afraid. He was just going to church, and now he’s being confronted with the very presence of God and God’s messengers. No wonder he says, “Woe is me!” He fears for his life. In Jewish thought, most people don’t look upon God and live. He cries. He thinks that his own imminent destruction lies before him. He doesn’t feel prepared for such an encounter. He’s struggling to understand what all this means. In fact, the Hebrew word for “woe” means three things-- to be ruined/destroyed, to be brought to silence, or to be made in the likeness of God. Isaiah is feeling more like the first meaning is going to happen to him—being destroyed.

Then a seraph flies to him and places a coal on his lips, proclaiming that Isaiah’s sins are forgiven. He has been washed clean of whatever lay in his past. He is now, with the help of a supernatural creature, prepared. His people and his God deem him ready to serve. God calls him, saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”

We don’t know how long Isaiah paused before responding. We don’t know if he went through a book-length of struggle and denial, as Katniss Everdeen did, before he stepped into his calling. We don’t know if he worried for his family’s safety or his own, if he accepted the real possibility of his own death in accepting the call. We don’t know how many breaths he took before he took a breath to say, “Here am I; send me!” He steps forward at great personal cost to serve his people and lead them to freedom. His riveting journey into the courage required to be a prophet keeps readers of the book of Isaiah spellbound—waiting to see if the people of Jerusalem are liberated from their dark days with the help of Isaiah’s voice. Turns out that maybe, just maybe, instead of destruction—the

word of call for him might make him more into the image of God—into the prophet he is called to be for his people.

III. The Cost of the Call—Our Response

One could argue that those of us in the kingdom of America in 2012AD live in dark days. We fear attacks, or have been made to fear attacks, from unknown terrorists at any time. Many people feel they have lost independence. Young people particularly are disillusioned with an economy in which jobs remain scarce. We have a strange Capitol, where people who serve in Congress retain enormous affluence seemingly doing nothing, while the 99% of the rest of the population struggle. Great fear and uncertainty dwell in the hearts of the people. So many of us retreat to our sanctuary of worship, hoping to find comfort and a feeling of security.

Now I couldn't engineer special effects like a blockbuster *Hunger Games* movie. I couldn't create seraph-like creatures nor a billowing robe of which the hem fills the entire sanctuary. I could use incense, but I thought some of you might be allergic, and smoke—well, that's not a good idea in a season of drought. I'm not able to create such a spectacle that you realize a sanctuary is holy, but that doesn't equate with comfort. In no way is following Jesus supposed to be comfortable. Our faith should challenge us, should stretch us, so that we become more like the God who created us. If we truly follow Christ, there come callings that should make us fear for our lives.

Thankfully, before we have to step out into our callings, God offers us forgiveness. Like the coal the seraphs placed on Isaiah's lips, washing him clean, so too God freely offers us forgiveness—for whatever we've done, for whatever we haven't done. Such forgiveness

comes as grace, freely offered. We just have to receive it, welcome it, and then be ready to change our lives in order to follow God's call to us.

Fortunately, to give us strength to make those changes, God nourishes us with a banquet. Today, set before us is a feast of bread and wine. This communion offers to us grace and forgiveness in the name of Jesus Christ. This communion purifies us, cleansing us of our sin and wrongdoing. This bread and wine work like that coal upon Isaiah's lips, preparing us for service. (Personally, I'll take bread and wine any day over a burning coal!)

Then, cleansed and ready, God speaks to us and says, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Who will go and bind up the broken-hearted? Who will go and feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, and welcome strangers? Who will go and clothe the naked, visit the sick, visit the prisoner? Who will go for us? Who will stand up for what is right? Who will make a difference in the world in Jesus' name? Who will resist the forces of evil in government? Who will step forward at great personal cost to serve our people? Who will journey into the courage required to be a Christian? For our young people, for ourselves, there is no greater way to make a difference in the world than to truly follow Christ.

May we take a deep breath. May we accept the calling God places upon our lives, no matter how big or small. May we have the courage to say, "Here am I; send me!" Amen

Let us pray:

Holy, holy, holy, Lord of hosts:

The earth is full of your glory. In the face of your divine presence, help us not to be frozen in fear. Help us not to be afraid of you who call us to be. Empower us to step into the callings you have upon our lives—even if that calling comes at great personal cost. Strengthen us so that we are ready for service. Purify and forgive us so that we are ready to make a difference in the world. Grant us courage to go where we are needed. Grant us courage to live into the calling you have for us. *Silence*

Holy, holy, holy Lord of hosts; the earth is full of your glory. We pray for our earth, for places of ecological disaster, for companies that exploit the creation for profit. We pray that

we might be in relationship with this wonderful world you have given us. Grant us courage to live into the calling you have for us. *Silence*

Holy, holy, holy Lord of hosts: the earth is full of your glory. We pray for those who aren't feeling so glorious right now, May they know your healing presence. May we visit the sick, bind up the broken-hearted . We pray for . . .

Holy, holy, holy Lord of hosts: the earth is full of your glory. On this Peace with Justice Sunday deliver us from trusting in the weapons of war and mistrusting the councils of peace. Deliver us from hearing, believing, and speaking lies about other nations. Deliver us from suspicions and fears that stand in the way of reconciliation. Deliver us from words and deeds that encourage discord, prejudice, and hatred; from everything that prevents us from fulfilling your promise of peace. We pray all these things in the name of the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

Communion

Words of invitation