

Larry R. Benfield
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When the committee assembled to decide which scripture lessons we would read in church at public worship, the person bringing the Bible into the room must have had a loose-leaf version in a three-ring binder and dropped it, and subsequently lost all the Old Testament except Isaiah. The evidence for this accident is that week after week in the lectionary the Old Testament reading is Isaiah, Isaiah, Isaiah, one book chosen out of 39 possible choices. If you are a preacher who likes to preach on the Old Testament, you can't get the voice of Isaiah out of your head. There are so many vivid stories from Genesis and Exodus, so many "could-be-best-selling-adult-movie" vignettes from the lives of the kings of Judah and Israel and countless other ne'er do wells, and what we get is Isaiah talking to us again and again.

And so we come here this evening to a service emphasizing the call to ordained ministry. Wouldn't it be nice, for example, especially on this day when we emphasize the role of the priest in our midst, to have a gripping visual story of a priest killing animals in the Temple, blood covering his hands as he slings it on everything he can find? The story is there in Leviticus. Or perhaps even Abraham ready to kill his own son who is laid out on the dry wood? It is there in Genesis. If you are going to be someone in charge of sacrifice, as priests are called to do, get a good story out of it, a story that emphasizes what you can do.

But alas, Holy Scripture is not there to confirm what we want; it is there to proclaim the way to wholeness and salvation. And that is exactly

what the book of Isaiah does for us, this story of Isaiah's call as a prophet in particular. This is a story, not primarily about what Isaiah does or says or even about his virtue, but about what it is like to be marked forever. In this story Isaiah is fundamentally changed, and there is no going back.

Literally, what takes place in the story is the mark of a hot coal on Isaiah's lips. Isaiah does not do anything; it is one of the seraphim of God that steps up to the plate and disfigures him, the seraph of God that brands him. Isaiah will no longer look the same when others look at him. He will no longer see his old self when he looks in the mirror. He will see a scar. He can do little but take note that scarred lips cannot speak as clearly and as loudly as the speaker might wish. What happens is that Isaiah's voice is diminished so that God might have a chance to speak. Throughout the book of Isaiah the introductory phrase becomes, "Thus says the Lord."

That is the way it is for those called to ordained ministry, our own voices diminished so that God has a chance to speak. Perhaps that is why we read Isaiah so much. Among healthy priests it is God's message that gets center stage, never our own. Yes, priests are in charge of sacrifice, but it ends up being a sacrifice of ego, a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, not a sacrifice of some other victim, either willing or unwilling.

The church at large has a tendency to want priests to do a lot of things, everything from speaking on every political issue (the specific speech, of course, depending on the politics of the parish), to teaching Christian

education classes, to being a profound preacher, to moving the chairs and tables in the parish hall (it is this last example in which the laity want to clergy to keep their mouths shut). Priests are called on to know about and be ready to implement every possible program the church has to offer, whether it be for children, adults, senior ministries, stewardship, or church growth. And simultaneously, the church wants its priests to look good, or as a friend of mine has asked about potential priests in his parish, "Can you take him out in public?" Are there any embarrassments? Any scars? We think that what the priest does and how blemish-free he or she looks will change congregations and usher in the kingdom of God.

But I have discovered that all the programming skills in the world and the epitome of clerical polish do not change congregations. The specific tasks that a priest does very well or sometimes relatively poorly do not guarantee the arrival of the kingdom. Rather, priests exercise their calling through who they are much more than what they do. Good priests know something about relationship. Good priests know when to be quiet and let God speak in the immediacy of the moment. Some of my most powerful pastoral moments have been when the only thing I could do was go sit beside the bereaved, for I knew all too well that any words I would utter would be inadequate. To play on the phrase of being marked forever or branded with a hot coal, I would say that one mark of a good priest is when his or her ego does not get in the way of the good news. Good priests realize that they are marked like Isaiah who was touched with a burning coal that changed forever who he was, not simply what he did.

To those of you being ordained and received this evening, I am sending you away from here with no more than an invisible mark on your forehead and a Bible in your hand. That is all you need to be the ordained person that God and the church call you to be. Don't get so wrapped up in yourselves that you forget that the people around you need to see how you authentically and graciously live with the scars of your own lives, how you live with the disfiguring mark of the burning coal that was placed on your lips, how you live with the imprint of hands that were placed on your head to set you apart.

Your people are looking for a new Isaiah whose great calling is to say no more than, "Thus says the Lord," and then tell the story, and in so doing bring good news of God's presence in this broken and hurting world. Ultimately, your people want to see God and to be restored with others who are on the same journey. You stand just a bit ahead of them, sort of like a prophet, a prophet who is not afraid to stand still and wait when the seraphim arrive. Amen.