

“So, what made you want to be a ___ (insert your life’s career path)

Call narratives are an important part of our story.

We don’t just want to know *what* people do, we want to know: Of all the things you could have done with the one life you were given, what made you choose this?

The Bible is full of call narratives, telling of *what* set people on the paths they would go down, but also, more importantly, *who* called them to walk those paths.

Abraham’s call to move to a new land

Moses’ burning bush

Joseph’s dreams

Samuel’s call in the night

Isaiah before the throneroom of God

Sometimes there is a sense that the calling *anticipated* the people who would be called, before they were even born!

Jeremiah reports that the word of the Lord came to him saying:

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
before you were born I set you apart;
I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”

Paul had his conversion as an adult, but reflecting back on his calling in his letter to the churches of Galatia he writes:

But when God, who set me apart from my mother’s womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles...

Today’s text is a “pre-birth commissioning as well”

Before I was born the Lord called me;

from my mother's womb he has spoken my name.

The question around today's text is not "who commissioned" but "who is being commissioned?" Who is Isaiah talking about?

Today's passage is the second of four poems (or songs) scattered throughout the final chapters of Isaiah that feature an unnamed Suffering Servant. The prophet writes during a time, 600 years before the birth of Jesus, when the Kingdom and legacy of Israel and Judah is in ruins, having been conquered and forcibly removed by Assyria and Babylon, where they were resettled as aliens, outside of their homeland.

If you read a book like Lamentations, a book written immediately after the fall of Jerusalem, you can hear in the writer's words how fresh the trauma was. The shock, the numbness, the disbelief.

The writer of the second part of Isaiah seems to have had more space to reflect on the trauma of the exile. More time to adapt, more time to process the theological implications of being a people without a land of their own. More time to reflect on what went wrong, where leadership failed, where they were corrupted, where they were weak, where they did not respond to God's call when it mattered most.

Part of climbing out of despair, reorienting, rediscovering hope, is reimagining a future in God's goodness, where the current weight of injustice and suffering will be no more.

It starts with believing again that God reaches into the brokenness of our humanity and commissions us as servants of the call to participate in that work.

Believing that God is not deterred by our failures to fulfill those calls.

That God continues to call, and to knock, and to shoulder tap, because God does not give up on us.

In a way, this Suffering Servant song is not a commissioning, it's a recommissioning. A reimagining of who God will work through and who God will send.

And still we ask, but who? Who will it be?
Is Isaiah speaking about himself? Is he the suffering servant? We know at his commission that he said "Here I am, send me!"

Others have looked to historical figures of Isaiah's time. The last days of the Kingdom of Israel were as chaotic as they were tragic. The Babylonian offensive had weakened Israel to the point where King Jehoiakim was forced to sign a treaty, in the name of Yahweh, that allowed Israel to rule itself at the cost of major tribute and taxation that would be regularly paid to Babylon. Jehoiakim foolishly broke that treaty with Babylon, seeking help from Egypt to get out from under the oppressive thumb of Babylon.

The results were disastrous. Babylon came with a vengeance and made an example of Israel, capturing Jerusalem and taking all the royalty, educated and skilled people back with them to Babylon.

Jehoiakim actually died before Jerusalem was captured, forcing his innocent 18 year old son into the kingship, to be immediately swept away as a prisoner of the Babylonians.

Interestingly, the scriptures are almost harder on Jehoiakim than on the Babylonians.

In breaking his treaty with Babylon, a treaty made in the name of Yahweh,
Jehoiakim had defiled the holy name of God.

In the view of some, the exile of the royal family and everyone else was the
penalty and reparation offering to atone for that sin.

Yet Jehoiakim's son still lived in Babylon, an innocent suffering servant.
Maybe Isaiah was talking about him, a young king to rise from the failures of
his father and become the type of ruler that God intended and Israel needed.

Others have noted that God says "You are my servant *Israel*, in whom I will
be glorified."

Perhaps the servant is not a particular person at all, but a personification of a
people!

The call of the suffering servant then maybe reflected their own suffering,
their own sense of inadequacy, and the road they must travel to restore their
faith and their image as a people of God!

Of course reading this passage as Christians, this text has another significant
dimension. As the Gospel writers and the early believers reflected on the life
and ministry of Jesus and who he was to them, they were continually drawn
back to these Suffering Servant passages.

To the Gospel writers, Jesus was, *is* the Suffering Servant. We can find these
passages quoted all over the Gospels.

In fact, I imagine most Christians would be startled to discover that there
was any question as to the identity of the Suffering Servant at all!

It is no coincidence that this text appears in the lectionary the week after
what is traditionally referred to as "Baptism Sunday."

Within the Biblical tradition of commissioning and callings, of God working
among us and through us, there is no more important commissioning than
that of Jesus, who was baptized into his ministry, and upon coming out of the

water, the heavens were opened and the Spirit of God descended like a dove, alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

In the Suffering Servant, Isaiah provides the mold, the framework, the template that Jesus will come to most profoundly fill and realize.

Isaiah wrote of the Suffering Servant, reflecting back on all of the failures of the past that led to Israel’s collapse and writing prophetically of what the future leader, emissary, messiah would look like.

Living in exile, leaning on God’s faithfulness, daring to imagine a leader that would redeem and transform God’s people.

*“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”*

Following his baptism, Jesus will walk out into the wilderness, where he will be tested for 40 days.

Jesus will be called the New Adam, yet where Adam failed in eating the fruit, Jesus will tell Satan “Man cannot live on bread alone.”

Jesus will be called the New Moses, but unlike Moses, after 40 days Jesus will not smash the stone tablets.

It is a commissioning, and in a way, it is also a recommissioning.

The Gospels draw on these comparisons to all that God has called throughout the Old Testament, yet also are clear to indicate that where they fall short, Jesus will not.

In Jesus, Isaiah's vision of the Suffering Servant will be fulfilled.

But just as the identity of the Suffering Servant can be looked at from different perspectives, let's not approach this text as sideline observers. As we follow Jesus into the waters of baptism, evaluating our own calls and proclaiming publicly our desire to be advocates for the Kingdom of God, let us consider how we also may take on the role of the Suffering Servant, willing to be a blessing for life and a light to the nations, whatever the cost.

As Stephanie Paulsell puts it:

“Embedded in this call to be a light to the nations is a call to know the world in which we hope to shine. Through study and encounter, through travel and prayer, through seeking to understand the results of our choices of what to buy, what to wear, what to eat, we return, like the Servant, to God and receive a deeper vocation, one that encompasses strangers far off, as well as dear ones close at hand.”

May Isaiah's Suffering Servant and the ways Jesus embodied it in his life, enrich the ways we speak about our own callings.

“So, what made you want to be a follower of Jesus?”