

## Ordinary Instruments; Magnificent Music

Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 150; Matthew 16:13-17

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The person who has become known as one of the greatest makers of violins who ever lived was Stradavari. There was also Guarneri, but not as well known. For all of the years since the death of Stradivari, makers of violins have tried to discover his secrets. One of his violins is in a museum in Italy. It is locked in a case that has temperature and humidity controls so that it can be protected. Once a year it is taken out for a concert violinist to play in concert. That is an honor that is of the highest for any violinist. Today a Stradavari can sell for anywhere from \$8M to \$400M.

A distinguished violinist was scheduled to give a concert performance in a certain city. Some folk, who were envious of his ability, circulated the rumor that it really wasn't his skill of playing that made the wonderful sounds come from the instrument so much as it was the quality of the violin that he played. They murmured that any violinist with enough practice could play well if they also had a violin made by Stradivari.

When the violinist came for the concert he played as one inspired. The listeners were enraptured. After the final number there was a standing ovation and prolonged applause. The violinist acknowledged their applause and when the cheering died away, he made a brief statement. "Some," he said, "have said that my music is due to the Stradivari instrument. It is true that it does indeed add much to the quality of the sound."

Holding up the violin that he had played that night, he went to the edge of the stage and handed it to a young boy sitting in the front row, and said, "Tonight I decided to leave my Stradivari at home." To the boy he said, "Take this violin as a gift. It is quite inexpensive, but with practice, you will find that it too can produce lovely music."

It is true that in the master's hands, beautiful music can be produced from the most ordinary of instruments. Part of the wonder of God's call to people throughout the ages has been that God calls ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary missions, extraordinary accomplishments for God.

God spoke to Isaiah while he was in the Temple in Jerusalem. It was in the year that King Uzziah died, so somewhere between 745 and 736 BCE. The death of King Uzziah signaled the end of an era of relative independence for Judah.

Tiglath-Pileser III came to power in Assyria in 745 BCE and soon began to expand his empire to include the small states of Syria and Palestine. His successor would continue the same policies.

Most of Isaiah's life was lived under the threat of Assyrian domination.

We know a few things about Isaiah that are implied by the reading of the scripture.

- He would have been ritually pure because he was in the Temple;
- His writings reveal an educated person who writes in classical Hebrew;
- His name means God is Salvation;
- He had access to kings, so he must have been of high social standing or perhaps of royalty.

And yet, when Isaiah experiences a theophany, a vision of the court of God, and is called to be a prophet to God's people, and he sees himself in God's presence, he cries out, "I'm lost; I'm a dead man!" All of his goodness; all of his education; all of his political standing; all of his influence are as nothing in the presence of the holiness of God. At that moment Isaiah saw nothing special or holy about himself, but God saw great possibilities and called Isaiah to be God's prophet to the people of Judah.

Move ahead to the time of Jesus.

Jesus had moved the base of his ministry to Capernaum after the people of his home town had tried to kill Him after his reading from the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue. It was the passage that predicted the coming of the Messiah. Jesus had said, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

He is now known as one of the people who live in the town of Capernaum, a village that has a strong fishing industry because it is located on the Sea of Galilee.

It is obvious that Jesus is known intimately by some of the fishermen.

There was also a toll road that ran through the town of Capernaum. It was at that toll booth that the tax collector Matthew sat.

After a night spent alone with God, his Father, in prayer about choosing his disciples, Jesus begins to select the people who would become his disciples.

Among those He chose were

- fishermen,
- a tax collector,
- people who had no power or influence on the religious or political scene,
- Ordinary folks.

There was probably nothing about any of the disciples whom Jesus chose that would have made them stand out as exceptional other than that they were good at doing the professions at which they worked.

There were also some women who were disciples of Jesus. One of them was married to a man who worked in the household of Caesar. We know the names of Joanna and Susanna and Mary Magdalene. There likely were others who were not named.

Their role seems to have been securing money to finance the ministry of Jesus.

Peter is the most mentioned of all of the disciples. No one steps up to speak more than Peter.

Peter is

- blustering,
- naïve,
- stumbling,
- eager,
- wavering,
- failing,
- repenting,
- weeping,
- restored.

He is loveable, not in spite of his faults, but because of them. He is so like us! However he began, he grew in his discipleship, in his becoming more and more like the Jesus he followed. Peter thought the invitation of Jesus more important than staying in his fishing boat. He left his business for others to manage and followed Jesus.

Even though Peter sometimes failed in his attempt to be a faithful disciple, he was not a failure. He would learn from all of the experiences of his life. He would become an agent of God's grace to the Gentiles as well as the Jews.

In the little book of 1 Peter (5:10), Peter writes to other Christians, saying, "After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, Who has called you to God's eternal glory in Christ, will restore, support, strengthen, and establish you."

He would travel to other lands and eventually be crucified as a "troublemaker" by the government in Rome.

Isaiah's message did not turn the people of Judah back to being faithful followers of Yahweh. He knew the outcome when he began his ministry, and yet, he was faithful to do what God called him to do. If we did not know the rest of the story, we might think them to be fools to give up all that they had to end up as they did. But we do know the rest of the story.

Isaiah prophesied the coming of the Messiah. He didn't see it in his lifetime, but it did come to pass.

Peter was crucified, but his remains are now buried under the altar of the Vatican cathedral. More than that, the Gospel that he shared with the Gentiles helped to make it possible for us to worship Jesus.

The author Henri Nouwen wrote a little book entitled *The Wounded Healer* in which he holds out the thought that if we are to become true healers in the lives of others, we must bear some wounds within our own lives.

Responding to any call that comes from God for any kind of ministry, large or small, requires that we look at God with enough faith to believe that God knows a positive outcome, even if we cannot see it.

Responding to any call from God to a ministry, large or small, requires that we do not look away from the hurts and the injustices that are happening to others.

Responding to any call from God to ministry, large or small, requires that we commit ourselves to spiritual formation, through study and prayer and action, being more formed into the likeness of Jesus.

God was not seeking a perfect person when God called Isaiah.

Jesus was not seeking perfect people when He called his disciples.

God is able to do miraculous, wondrous, things with the person who is honest with oneself and honest with God and seeks to follow Jesus as his disciple.

We are about to begin a new church year in a few weeks. As a congregation we are celebrating a century of ministry and moving into the future.

What do you hear God saying to you?  
Amen.