

“Perceiving God and Call” based on Isaiah 6:1-10 and John 12:37-43
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on May 26, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Today, we will hear from our seniors, Lillian Moore, James Petrilli, and Lawson Taylor. These three seniors are smart, strong, and seem prepared to face the challenges ahead. They have a lot on their plate, and this summer, which should be fun, may well end up feeling like an endless checklist that absorbs the next eight weeks, making it all seem to go by faster than this sermon will likely feel.

Each one is ready for the constant question we all want to know – or at least that we more aged members think we have to ask, ‘So, what are your plans for next year?’ or ‘What are you going to study in college?’ You’ve been asked that 600,000 times by now?

Lilian, James, and Lawson please don’t hold this against us. Please. Believe it or not, that question asked 600,000 times is an attempt to connect with you. Most of us who ask are hoping there will be something in your answer by which we can better identify with you, share a little of our experience, and therefore, grow closer to you.

As high school seniors, you have a certain confidence about you in these situations, believe it or not, and us older people are clamoring for your attention. Those closest to you are probably trying to squeeze in a bunch of activities, both out of concern for how much they will miss you when you’re gone, and to make sure you leave confident you belong here, to come back. A little farther out from your closest circle, there will be others who want to get together, be it to cement a connection they wish was closer than it is, or at least assuage guilt for not doing more when you both had more time.

In all of these relationships, your feelings will be mixed – you’ll be drawn in, but also feel the overwhelming urge to pull away, to make a break for it, and just go. As a parent, when I have to go somewhere without the kids, one of them will inevitably go on about how they don’t want me to go. It hurts, because I know I have to be somewhere for this or that or some other thing. Rationally, I know I have to go and my kids aren’t neglected, but emotionally, I feel guilty. I want to stay.

What happens is I feel overwhelmed and get grumpy – not because I’m actually angry with them, but I’m frustrated that I have to go. So, I pull away, make a break, and just go. I’m confident, without having known you when you were younger, that your parents had these same feelings and now, the roles are reversed.

Now you are the one pulling away from your parents, even grumpy because you feel that conflict – You think “I have to go, but maybe I don’t fully want to go.” But it’s your turn to explore your limits, to pursue your interests and look for your purpose, your calling – or at least, your own opportunities. You see, there’s a difference between finding your purpose and finding your opportunities.

We’ll get to that in a minute, but let me tell you this current level of interest in you, as annoying as it is – it may well be gone within the first few months of school. You may see the interest spike as you get to know new people, your fellow classmates. But then it may vanish, and you may feel like you’re only seeking, waiting for someone to act like they care about you. You might start looking for opportunities to fit in, to be liked, to feel loved. You may well feel lonely.

What's more, you already have an impulse to make your own choices and break away from the former adults who always told you what to do and what to think. Now you'll find a bunch of smart people, new to you. They will seem flawless. Their arguments for this, that, or another thing will seem to be complete, and challenge your core beliefs. You may think, "how has no one expressed it this way before." You may get a sense of enlightenment and eyes opened. You may feel unworthy on the one hand, and ready to take on the world with the other.

Some may be wondering why I'm bringing all of this up or what this has to do with Isaiah? The late-great Mr. Rogers had a saying, "Anything that is mentionable is manageable." The truth is that I want to say these things from up here in this pulpit, because you need to know that you are not alone – you are loved.

Yes, it's true: Post college adults and all our questions are awful. It's also true that we will keep asking – over and over and over again. You can manage this. Take a deep breath. You know it is coming, so expect it and prepare. We just want to connect with you; we really do. We want to let you know you are loved and be closer to you.

And again, I know, summer will seem to go by faster than this never-ending sermon. But it's worth saying that there will be lots and lots of demands on your time. Know this, so make sure you eat well, and don't neglect your sleep. Lots of the things that you must do, will require your full attention. Fitting in your friends and these constant requests from others may cause you to try to burn the candle at both ends. It's ok to say "no." It's ok to maintain your priorities. It's been mentioned, so start preparing for it, because this too you can manage.

Lastly, if, and likely when, this all goes away, and you start to feel lonely, unworthy, or scared, please know that all those people clamoring for you back home still love you. You don't have to run back to them, but don't have to hide your need for them. You may have made a big deal about leaving, and getting away. You might have even gotten grumpy – but remember, since we have mentioned it, it's out in the open and you can manage it.

Be humble and set aside your pride. It's ok to admit your needs and to be vulnerable, especially with your family and friends. You can text, call, email, or make a short visit. What's more, if this is not enough, it's also ok to seek counseling and things like that. It's also important – most important – that you seek God.

You see, part of what happens when we are lonely, is we try to fix it all by ourselves. We latch on to something or someone else, trying to fill that hole. To fix loneliness, you may try to be more independent to avoid vulnerability. Or you might get more dependent, latching on to another person, giving you someone to blame, or someone to be absorbed into.

If you know this in advance, you can manage it. You will feel peer pressure to change, to fit in. Change is good for all of us. We all need to change to grow. Changing to fit-in is risky. Be authentic. Don't copy others. Figure out how to love others, bringing life where you go. That is where you find the difference between your calling, and merely a good opportunity is seen.

There are lots of good opportunities out there to make money, gain power, or popularity, doing a lot of things. But none of these things will nourish who you really are – the fullness of you. I believe God has a purpose for each of you in this world. This is the reason you are you. Knowing how you

see God will help you discern that purpose. How you see God will lead you toward your calling, rather than mere opportunities. You see, you'll be faced with many new ways of seeing God or the absence of a God. Each one will impact the way you see yourself and your purpose in this world.

Recently, I enjoyed reading a pair of books by two brilliant scientists. Each one arguing in opposite directions about the origin of the world. Lawrence Kraus argues that creation can come from nothing, because matter and antimatter combine and explode, each one subsuming the other for a time. For this to be, Kraus argues, no god is necessary. Antimatter is nothing. Matter is something. Right now, matter is winning, he says. Eventually, antimatter will win, and it will all start over. Life is just an accident.

It's interesting, but if this is your view of God, or the lack thereof, then who are you? As a physicist, Kraus says he "likes" the insignificance that this viewpoint places on his own life. He says it frees him to pursue whatever he wants and his opportunities. But what if the "whatever" someone wants is injustice, like murder? Well, that's where the society becomes the god to enforce justice, but how many societies agree on what justice is?

In the second book, Robert Lanza argues that anything which exists must have an observer. It hinges on Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle in quantum mechanics. Therefore, the existence of life is required for the existence of anything. He says you don't need a god for this because life exists to observe. If existence depends on an observer, then all of the coincidences and improbabilities needed for life that people point to for the existence of God are not random because life requires them.

A biologist and doctor, Lanza says he "likes" the idea that all life is then intrinsically connected, and there is no concept of nothingness, since everything exists in every possibility. In his model, we choose what is most advantageous because all possibilities always exist.

I find both of these interesting, but if antimatter and matter are constantly at odds, where did this antimatter-versus-matter constant come from? Isn't it something? And if life observes, therefore creating reality, what about before life existed? Both scientists have answers for these, but I'll say they are unsatisfying for me. Kraus says the moment of antimatter winning is nothingness, but the only "something" is when matter expands. Lanza says that time and space don't really exist, and that they are functions of life's observations.

What I find interesting is that each one talks of what they "like" to support their arguments. Yet each says they struggle with people who believe in God doing the same, as if we believe because we are afraid of death or something else we want. But in truth, all any of us can do with the unknowable is testify to what we have witnessed, our experience, and how that shapes us.

Let me then tell you what it is that "I like" and how that shapes my view of God. I like the Trinity. It's fitting I'm reaching on Trinity Sunday. The Trinity is a single God who is a God of community. The Trinity is complete, in and of itself – one God in three persons. This is eternal Father and eternal Son loving in and through the Spirit, each one existing before time and space were created, not as separate beings, but as one being in community. This God is whole and complete, each one fully eternal. Never was the Father not a father, nor the Son not a son.

A complete Triune God doesn't need us. No, the Triune God wants to share with us. This is not a lonely single deity needing creation for something to do, where human must aspire to be worthy of the attention of this god. Nor is it a scenario of multiple gods competing for supremacy, where humanity is created for these gods to compete over worship. In these scenarios, rather than a purpose, we need opportunity to get the attention and favor of overly emotional deities.

The single Triune God means that creation then comes from the overflow of love. Our God needs nothing but instead desires to share life, love, and God's whole self with us. If this is our vision of God, and we believe we are made in this God's image, then our role is not to be fearful underlings, but active participants. We each have a calling to share life, love, and our whole selves.

In our text today, Isaiah is brought into the throne room of God, and the image is of serpent-like angels with six wings covering the fullness of God, who is so much larger than the space. Just the hem of the robe fills it. Isaiah is humbled. He feels he is unworthy. He sees and hears God and angels. God's voice says, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?" Isaiah responds, "Here I am. Send me."

You see, this text for the early church was seen as a vision of Jesus – the eternal Son. This is what John says in writing that Isaiah saw Jesus in his glory and spoke about him. The same Eternal Son, fully one with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is the one who John says became flesh and dwelled among us. He lived as we live and die the shameful death on a cross for us. Yes, he rose again for us, and ascended for us, sending the Holy Spirit to live in and among us here today. The Spirit empowers us to live our calling to be like him.

For you Graduates, and for all of us, how we imagine God, how we perceive God, matters. The Trinity and the amazing love of God are not easy concepts for us to believe. We struggle to wrap our finite brains around this infinite reality. Just like Kraus and Lanza, just like monotheism of Islam and polytheist religions, at a certain point we have to admit, we just can't know everything.

But where the Triune God leads us is into a calling to share love, life, and give of our whole selves. It is not personal or social opportunism, nor is it the appeasement of a god or gods. Because of my belief in the Triune God, I believe each of you has a calling, and that calling is grounded in love, life and giving of your whole self.

Your calling may not be your job. Calling doesn't necessarily even mean volunteering in the church. Your calling is what the Holy Spirit empowers you to do to bring unity and peace into the world around you, by sharing love, life, and giving of your whole self.

Isaiah's calling was not opportunity – it was hard – but he proclaimed God's word. He pointed to Jesus and his coming in human flesh to be the Suffering Servant, who being God in our flesh, shared love and life, by giving his whole self. Let us look for our calling, our purpose. We can lay aside the glory of human beings and what people say to recognize we are loved by the Triune God who gives us life and gave his whole self for us, so that for the Glory of God, we might share love and life, giving of our whole selves to be a force for peace and unity in this world. Amen.