

The Story of *Here I Am, Lord*



When I was a young Jesuit, studying theology in Berkeley, California, a friend came to me one day asked me for a favor. "Dan, I know this is late notice, but I'm planning the diaconate ordination ceremony and need a piece of music set to the text of Isaiah chapter 6." He saw the look of shock on my face knowing I was well aware that the ceremony was only three days away. I told him that I was sick with an awful case of the flu and didn't know if I could compose anything suitable in that short time. He encouraged me and I told him that at the very least I would try to complete something in time for the ordination.

I had always loved the particular Scripture passage (Isaiah 6) where God calls Isaiah to be his servant and messenger to the people and Isaiah responds with both hesitation and doubt, but also with a humble willingness to surrender to God. If it was going to work, it would have to be God's power and grace making it happen. Much like Isaiah I was not very sure that I could meet the request my friend had made, but I was willing to try.

I remember sitting at my desk with a blank music score in front of me and asking God to be my strength. As I sat there praying for help, I remembered also the call of Samuel, where God came calling in the middle of the night and asked Samuel to do something beyond what he thought he was capable of. I worked for two days on the piece and I remember being exhausted. I was making last minute changes to the score as I walked it over to my friend who lived several blocks away. I remember being very unsure of myself, but hoping that it would be what he had wanted for the ordination.

And it was ok. It was more than ok. From the very beginning, people loved the piece and clearly identified with the dialogue between God and us that is the core of the song. In the years following, so many have spoken to me or written how they had their own experience of God "calling in the night" and being given the courage to respond.

For me, the story of "Here I Am, Lord" tells of the God who overshadows us, giving power to our stumbling words and the simple works of our hands, and making them into something that can be a grace for people. The power God gives is far beyond what we could have planned or created.