

On The Road With Pastor Rick...

Once again I find myself coming in at midnight from a late night church service and a long ride home. Last night, (February 27) we had the whole Harvest Evangelism family at Fellowship Church in Rainsville, Alabama. For all of ya'll not from Alabama, Rainsville is on Sand Mountain up near the Tennessee line. That's country!

We had never been to Fellowship Church. Our invitation to be there came from the pastor, Morris Hicks. That's normal, having the pastor invite you. That was about the only "normal" thing that happened last night.

Pastor Hicks knew about our ministry because his daughter is at our ladies' home, Hosanna Home. Casey is a lovely 23 year old lady who got addicted to methamphetamine. Drugs and drug addict friends pulled a pastor's daughter out of church into a dark life of addiction. Casey fell far. She wasn't just a member of the church, she was a leader on their Praise Team. Her mom played the piano and her dad played lead guitar. These folks praised God. They REALLY PRAISED GOD. This isn't a "turn to your hymnals and mumble" kind of church. These folks sang, clapped, raised their hands and danced before God. They were serious about praise and did a seriously good job at it. As good as they were, there was a missing voice in their harmony, Casey. Keep all this in mind as I share about our service there. God did some amazing things that night. One of which was to give me this message I now share with you.

I normally write my sermons out in a manuscript form. Following the example of my mentor, David Wilkerson. It usually takes me the better part of a week to put a message together. I pray, read, research, then write. Then I usually throw what I have written away and start over. Finally, after 3,4 days, about a dozen cups of coffee (alright, since this is a Christian newsletter let's be honest...about 25-30 cups of coffee...not more than 50...unless it's a really bad week) and another dozen mulligan messages I'll come up with a sermon. With God's help I'll preach on a Sunday what He's woven in my life the week before. That's what happens normally. This didn't turn out to be a "normal" service.

We actually began our Sand Mountain Sunday with a service earlier that day, at First Baptist Church in Boaz, Alabama. It was a "normal" service. It was wonderful, but predictable. Nothing wrong with that. Some folks could use a little regularity in their spiritual life. As Baptists, we're pretty down with the routine.

I preached Sunday morning in Boaz. My sermon had been prepared the week before. I preached it as I had prepared it. Some folks told me it was a "good word". There was certainly nothing out of the ordinary about it. I always tell people time will tell how 'good' a sermon is, you judge seed by it's fruit, and fruit takes time. I've preached enough to know some sermons I've thought were pretty good were in fact awfully bad. Then again, some sermons I was sure were a failure ended up touching someone's life. It's all in God's hands.

I did my best Sunday morning at the Baptist Church in Boaz. I was prepared to preach another sermon Sunday evening at the Fellowship Church in Rainsville. I wasn't prepared for what happened when God showed up in such an unusual manner. Aren't you glad God doesn't need us to be prepared for Him to do something. We say it's all about Him, yet we act like it's up to us. I have, I do, I did that night, until I clearly heard His voice. When God speaks, thunder listens.

Fellowship is a Charismatic-Pentecostal church. That doesn't scare me. I'm half Pentecostal myself (half Baptist). I guess that makes me a Pente-Baptist. I've been in Pentecostal churches all my life. I've preached at charismatic conferences (charismatics love conferences). So, when the folks at Fellowship cranked up their guitars and turned up their microphones it didn't bother me. Been there, done that. When they sang with hands lifted up, I didn't stare. In fact, I lifted mine. When they clapped, I clapped, albeit with a white man's rhythm, off beat. When the Fellowship folks sang about David dancing before the Lord, I shuffled, a Baptist can only be pushed so far. Besides, I dance like Fred Sanford. It didn't stop them. They had an awesome hour of worship, maybe more.

Our men from His Place and the ladies from Hosanna Home joined them. They sang about freedom, and we felt it. They sang about flying away and it seemed possible. A young man came to the altar, during the worship and our men from His Place came impromptu to circle him in prayer. Then a lady came to the altar, collapsing in tears. Immediately, ladies from our Hosanna Home were there to lay hands on her in prayer. Things were getting interesting.

We were scheduled to sing a couple of songs and share testimonies. I was scheduled to preach. Our names were advertised on the church marquis. God wasn't impressed with our schedule. He must've missed the sign. The Fellowship Church folks kept singing, praying and otherwise being totally non-religious and unpredictable.

Things kindof culminated when the praise band called Casey up to join them in a song. Casey, the pastor's daughter. Casey, whose momma played the keyboard in the praise band. Casey who everyone in the church knew. And who everyone knew was a recovering meth addict, living in a group home, our group home. This girl had a history there. As she slowly walked up to the platform, everyone watched, including me, especially me. Her story on Sand Mountain was about to add another chapter. A meth addict-preacher's daughter back with the band. This could be interesting. As stories go, it

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proved to be epic.

Casey didn't strut to the stage like she belonged there. Neither did she crawl like she was forever unworthy to return to her place in her church, with her family, leading worship. She walked determined, resolute, yet humble. There was a holy fear on her face. I could tell she wasn't afraid of singing, she's sung all her life. She wasn't afraid of having forgotten the words, they'd called for her favorite song, her theme song. What's she's afraid of I thought, was letting God down. "She doesn't want to sing tonight and backslide next week. She doesn't want to be a hypocrite or a stumbling block. She knows the power of God, yet she remembers the power sin has had on her life. She's flying high on the wings of eagles tonight, but she remembers Icarus flew too, and crashed with his own wings aflame."

I felt what Casey was feeling as she walked up to that stage. Not stage fright, but the fear of God, coupled with an honest fear of her own failing. If the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, we were about to learn a lesson. It probably wouldn't hurt a lot of church folks to close all their "3 Easy Steps To God" books and simply get on their knees before Him. A little fear goes a long way.

There was a Holy reverence on all of us as Casey got up on the stage and picked up her microphone. I could sense it. I could see it. A peek. The Bible tells us to "watch and pray." As they were praying, I was watching. I knew something as about to happen. As she began to sing, it did.

Casey's song was one I knew well. "Yes Lord We Will Ride." I've heard it a hundred times. It was different this time. The tune was the same. The band hit every note on key, and why not, it had been one of their theme songs. Casey's voice was that perfect country twang you expect to hear on Sand Mountain (Rainsville was the home of Vestal Goodman, of the Happy Goodmans). As I listened everything sounded good, real good. I was proud of Casey for getting up there as she had done. She was nervous. Why not, it was the first time she'd sung in church for months. First time she'd been sober for years. She was the prodigal come home. No wonder the father had run to meet his prodigal son as he saw him coming home in the Bible story (Luke 15). It was all I could do to keep from running up on that stage to hug Casey and she's not my daughter, she's a girl at Hosanna Home. He mother and father had tears running down their faces as she sang. We all did.

I don't know if you're familiar with that song, "Yes Lord We Will Ride." If not, check it out on You Tube (written by Andy Parks). Knowing Casey's past made this song even more powerful. When she came to the verse where it says, *"That fire in His eyes is His love for His bride, And He's longing that she be with Him, Right by His side. That fire in His eyes is His burning desire, That His bride be with Him, right by His side. And He's calling out to us right now, "Will you ride with me?"*" she choked up. All the pain from her past mixed together with all the hope for her future and it overwhelmed her. It was overwhelming. It was Biblical in proportion. Mom and dad weeping. A lost daughter coming home. A church rejoicing. You really had to be there, but trust me, it made all we do worthwhile. It made all we do matter. If you give to support this ministry you would've felt good about your investment watching Casey come home.

I had to preach after all that. I wasn't about to try and add to what He had done. You don't one-up God. Come what may, He'll always be the one up. As Casey was singing, I told God, "You'd better tell me what to say or I'm not saying nothing." He told me what to say.

Listening to Casey's song as I watched all our His Place men and Hosanna Home ladies come to the altar was so moving. It would've been so easy to be like Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration and build a tabernacle so we could stay there. Jesus didn't let Peter stay on the mount and He didn't let us stay in the glory of the moment there on Sand Mountain. There is a greater glory.

I was thrilled to see all our men and women at the altar. But I was also filled with a holy sense of deja vu. I'd seen it all before, at least a hundred times. I had been the one at the altar, probably more than a hundred times. I couldn't help but recall all those I'd seen at an altar who I'd later seen cold, back slidden, indifferent, even dead. O, yes, I've seen the same faces once glowed with glory at an altar only a few years later cold and dead in a coffin. I've seen some cold and dead who weren't in a coffin. I'm not sure which was the sadder.

Watching all my men and women at the altar made me think about my own life. I've been to my share of altars. I've prayed for the Fire to fall on Sunday and shrunk back from Pilate's courtyard blaze by the weekend. Why? Why do we make promises to serve Him at all costs only to sell out to the highest bidders offer. How come we relish in our Father's birthright yet allow the simple smell of pottage to turn our heads and change our minds. Esau is not the only son to be so simply swayed. The bitter taste of a traitor's cup oft taints the sip offered by our Savior. We stream to altars with the tune of Just As I Am only to leave Just As We Were. I didn't want to leave that night without knowing how the Lord could help us find a better ending, a surer way. I wasn't disappointed. God led me to a familiar story, but with a grander caveat. An addendum to an ending. I only thought I knew. Like all good stories, the Author surprised me with a thought I'd missed before. If the Word of God is living (and it is) what He showed me that night made me all the more alive. Life trumps opinion every time.

Isaiah 6 is one of those chapters that sticks out in the Bible for it's beauty and pageantry. A young Isaiah

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early on in life and ministry has a truly divine encounter with The Divine. He has a vision of God is all His grandeur.

“In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the LORD sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke.”

WOW! What a vision. Can you imagine? This stuff is real. Isaiah’s not dreaming after eating too much gefilte fish before bed. This isn’t lox and bagels talking to him in REM code. He hasn’t made this up. The image of God he’s seeing, is God! That will do something to you.

What it did to Isaiah is impress him to sign up for the God draft. Got needs someone to get a job done and Isaiah says, *“I’m Your man.”* *“Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me.”* Isaiah 6:8

You can’t blame Isaiah for his bold exuberance. In fact you’ve got to be impressed. God is in need of a messenger and Isaiah pipes up like the smart kid who used to sit in front of you. *“Oooo, Oooo, pick me, pick me. I know the answer Mrs. Snodgrass, pick me.”*

I have to be honest, I hated that kid. What made him think he was so special. Just because he knew $4 \times 4 = 16$ didn’t make him God. Heck, I always wondered if he was so smart why couldn’t he remember to wipe his own nose. But Mrs. Snodgrass thought he was special. She always called on him. And all the parents at PTA though he was special too, going on and on about his popsicle stick model of a pilgrim fort. Why couldn’t they see the flaws in his design? I was no expert, but even I could see his plastic Indians were almost as tall as the walls of his “wonderful fort”. Let one Indian get a running jump and he’d sail over the wall. No one but me thought of that. Everyone else was too busy bragging on and on about the kid who always raised his hand. I was the real smart kid, I thought. I knew how tough the real world was, including the playground and the bus ride home. It would take a lot more than raising your hand to hold the world together.

I think that kid grew up to be an accountant. He was busted in a ponzi scheme scam and sentenced to twenty years. Last time I saw him was on the front page of our local paper. He still needed to wipe his nose.

Isaiah was way cooler than the kid in my class. But he still had to learn a lesson before God could use him. A lesson a lot of us need to learn. Last week as I watched everyone at the altar with their hands raised, I remembered others I’d seen at similar altars. I remembered specific men and women I’d seen over the years boldly proclaiming their call to go into all the world and be the next Moody. My mind flooded with a slow motion replay of all the people I had known who were so sure, so specifically sure that they were going to run through troops and leap over walls, they wanted their medals early. In Bible school they not only knew the names of all those shadowy kings, they seemed to think they had restored their rule. After all, their t-shirts proved it. *“I’m a King’s kid.”* Myself, I always felt more like a frog than a Prince Charming. I definitely acted more like a Robin Hood than a King Richard. Like my grade school nemesis, my Bible school classmates seemed to think having all the right answers was key to success and popularity. Why wouldn’t the Teacher pick them, couldn’t He see their hands raised high?

Like Isaiah, how often have we raised our hands, *“Pick me Lord! Here I am, send me.”* Our intentions are pure, our plans are purposed. We’ll go into all the world. We’ll get the job done. We are so sure of our selves. Perhaps too full of the same.

We sign up for mission trips. We volunteer to teach Sunday School. We measure our devotion by martyrs’s memories. Others may have up or given out, but not us, glory has called and hurriedly we followed.

Turn on Christian T.V. Visit the next, now great revival. Pick up the latest copy of the Christian “People” magazine. Over and over you’ll see the faces and the stories of men and women who are certain they’re going to change the world. I’m talking about good men and women with noble intentions and lofty, enviable goals. They are modern day Isaiahs who’ve heard a Divine distress signal, *“Whom shall I send? Who will go for me?”* How quickly we raise our hands, *“Pick me, pick me.”* How quickly we falter. How often we fail.

I know. I’ve seen the commissioning of a hundred saints to be. I’ve looked into their eyes, sincere with the assuredly they would be God’s answer to creation’s chaos. In no short time I’ve seen many, quite possibly the majority come completely undone. Their sincerity insufficient.

Not only have I seen this pious pity in a hundred other faces, I’ve seen it more in mine. My calling to ministry came in a preacher’s call from the same story. *“Whom shall I send? Who will go for Me?”* I too raised my hand. *“Here am I, send me.”* I confidently volunteered. Before I could plan to fail, I had failed. I was so sure of my calling. When I fell, it happened before I could figure out why, or how, or how to keep from falling again and again. I was a lion who thought he had the heart only to realize in no short time my heritage was of Oz, not Judah. More a Judas than a John Wayne.

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I never intended to give up so easily. My hypocrisy was not planned. I was as sincere as I knew how to be, all foolheartedly followers usually are. We plan to change the world only in the end to question the change, on lack thereof in our lives.

So what do we do? Giving up is not an option. Neither can you hide or never raise your hand. Sooner or later the Teacher calls on those who sit idly, hoping they might be invisible. Like is not a spectator sport. At some time you have to actually get in the game. If that seems scary, it should. This is for real. Life doesn't give you a do-over.

Isaiah raised his hand. He volunteered. His, "Here am I" became a "Here it is", a finished task, a job well done. He did the job God called him to. He wrote a book that bears his name. Since God is no respecter of persons. How come Isaiah succeeded while we most often succumb.

I think most of you who read this want to succeed in your service. If you weren't serious you wouldn't be reading a ministry message. If you weren't real, REAL serious you sure wouldn't be reading mine. So what's the deal? Why do we all too often go to an altar and end up in a desert? The very night I've been writing of, there at the Sunday night service in Rainsville, the Lord showed me a truth.

I was thumbing through my Bible as I prayed about the entire issue. All the "whys" I've mentioned. Why do we volunteer only to become deserters? With Isaiah 6:8, "Here am I" burning in my mind I ended at the end of Isaiah's accounting of his call. I came across another verse. God led me to another verse. And this one made sense of it all.

Isaiah begins his book with "Here am I". At the end, Isaiah 65:1 it is God who says, "No Isaiah, it's not about you." There is a cry more critical than a man saying, "Here am I." In Isaiah 65:1 it is God who says "Here am I, here am I."

Isaiah's Lord, the God he had seen, "high and lifted up with His train filling the temple," comes with glory at the end of Isaiah's assignment and reminds him, "Here am I" Isaiah, "Here am I."

The very God who had told Moses from a burning bush, "Tell them I AM sent you." now tells Isaiah that He's there with him. In fact, He tells all of us, "Here am I." Should you be discouraged, He's there to lift you. Feel like a failure? He's there to forgive. Confused? Look beside you, He's there to lead you.

That's the crux of the answer. Your answer is a cross. And the God on that cross came down, not just to die, but to live in you. He says to you, "Here am I." For whatever you need today I hope you look around and realize, He's right beside you. It's not about you going out to the mission field or coming down to an altar; it's about God come down to dwell amongst us. It's not our, "Here am I," but rather God's reply, "No, here am I!" That's sufficient. That's grace.

That's all you'll ever need.

Rick

I hope these messages are a blessing to you. I would love to hear back from you if God somehow uses them in your life. You can contact me at rickhagans@harvestevangelism.org. or on facebook, "Rick Hagans" or you can write me at PO Box 2888, Opelika, AL 36803. I read every response. I pray for every need you mention.

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