In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!” And the LORD said to Satan, “The LORD rebuke you, O Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this man a brand plucked from the fire?”

There’s a wonderful scene in the movie As Good As It Gets. The character played by Jack Nicholson falls in love with a woman played by Helen Hunt, who is rather ambivalent toward him. Melvin is kind and generous to Carol and her sick son, but he’s got lots of quirky habits. He’s agoraphobic, obsessive-compulsive, bigoted and can be very rude, but Melvin is desperate not to lose Carol. His friend, Joe, says, “You know what you want. Go over there tonight. You can do this. Tell her how you feel. Do this. You have a chance here.”

So Melvin finally goes over to Carol’s house and fumbles around in his usual way, trying to express his feelings. “Why can’t I just have a normal boyfriend?” Carol laments. Carol’s mother, who is listening to the conversation, says, “Everyone wants that, dear. It doesn’t exist.” And Carol says to Melvin, “Come on in and try not to ruin everything by being you.”

There’s no such thing as a normal person, is there? We’re all slightly irregular, aren’t we, just like the clothes we buy at the Rummage Sale or the ones we buy in the outlet stores that come with a tag saying “As Is.” The clothes are heavily discounted, so we know there’s a flaw
somewhere. Sometimes the flaw is obvious: a stain, a zipper is broken, a hem is out, a button is off. Other times, we look and look and can’t the flaw – until we buy the item and get home; then, it’s too late. We ought to know better. The signs are clear in stores like that: no returns, no refunds, no exchanges. The good news with Rummage Sale clothes, however, is that if you don’t like what you bought, you can just bring everything back next time!

We humans are like that, too. We’re all slightly irregular. Well, maybe except for our newborn grandson. I think he’s just about as perfect as can be! The rest of us are flawed, something not right, something missing. Perhaps it’s difficulty telling the truth, a tendency to exaggerate, an addiction, a cruel tongue, a quick temper, passive-aggressive behavior. We’re usually not happy with the flaws in others, so, in the words of John Ortberg, we “enter into an endless attempt to fix them, control them, or pretend what they are not. One of the great marks of maturity is to accept the fact that everybody comes ‘as is.’”

At the same time, we deny the irregularities in ourselves. It’s natural for us to want to be normal. We don’t want to stick out. We want to be loved and accepted. Now I’ve never been a person who really needs to be accepted and fit in with the crowd. I’ve always lived my life the way I felt God was calling me to live it, regardless of how odd other people might think I am. But even I can remember back to junior high school when I was desperate to fit in. I didn’t want to stick out at all, so I tried to dress and look like everyone else.

A few years back Gary and I went to see a wonderful musical revue of the 60’s called “Beehive.” I was in junior high in the late 60’s, and as I watched the musical, I realized, to my horror, that I, too, wore my hair in a beehive, teased way up. It’s right there in my 9th grade picture! Today, I can’t believe I looked that way, but that’s how you fit in as a teenager.

I’ve now accepted the fact that I am different. I am more than slightly irregular. But I’m proud of that because God created me and each one of you as unique, one-of-a-kind creatures. God made us “as is,” a curious blend of sinfulness and grace-fulness. God has fashioned me and each one of you for loving and being loved, for being called by God and for responding to that call. But, as Jack Nicholson learned in As Good As It Gets, we are the ones who have to turn our slight irregularity into a passion for making a positive difference in the world. We can’t wait for God to act. We can’t wait for others to act. We can’t wait for the church to act. Our calling is to discover the uniqueness of our identity and then go out and revive and change the world. Our purpose is to say, “Here I am, Lord.”

Our sermons this spring are going to focus on the life and thought of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. When you really get to know Wesley, you realize that he, like each one of us, was slightly irregular. However, this man used his gifts as well as his irregularity to become one of the major figures of the 18th century.

The traditional rehearsal of Wesley’s statistics is mind-boggling: 250,000 miles traveled on horseback around England, 40,000 sermons preached over a span of 66 years, more than 400 publications on every conceivable topic. He rose at 4 a.m. every morning. All this from a man who was 5 feet, 3 inches tall and weighed 126 pounds. John Wesley was a legend in his own day. He was also a controversial figure.
Different opponents portrayed him as a Quaker, a Papist, a ranting enthusiast, an upper-crust snob or Methodistically mad. Indeed, John Wesley was a complex and peculiar man. He was an educated Oxford don yet spent most of his life working among the oppressed and disadvantaged. He was a champion of the poor, yet a defender of the political establishment that caused many of England’s problems. He was a master of expression in several languages, yet strove to express “plain truth for plain people.” He urged his preachers not to marry, yet he himself married and failed miserably as a husband. Slightly irregular, I would say.

John Wesley was the 15th of 19 children and was born on June 17, 1703 to Samuel and Susanna Wesley. Nine of their children died as infants. John’s father was an Anglican clergyman. There’s very little information about his growing up years, except for one event that indelibly etched itself on John’s life. It was a fire that destroyed his home when he was 5 years old.

You see up here in the chancel area two engravings of that fire. We have a very valuable collection of Wesley memorabilia here at First Church, and I would encourage you to come up and take a look at the engravings after worship. One is of John being plucked from the fire and the other is of his father praying after all eight children were saved.

In John’s published version of the story, on February 9, 1709 some sparks fell on the roof of the Wesley parsonage. Samuel and the maid were able to rescue all of the other children except for John, who had been sleeping on the second floor. When John awoke, he climbed up on a chest to get out the window. A few men in the yard saw John and decided it was too late to get a ladder. So one man climbed on the shoulders of the other and plucked John from the window. John later wrote, “Just then the whole roof fell, but it fell inward, or we had all been crushed at once. When they brought me into the house where my father was, he cried out, ‘Come, neighbors! Let us kneel down! Let us give thanks to God! He has given me all eight children; let the house go, I am rich enough!’”

It’s actually thought that disgruntled parishioners set fire to the parsonage. Now if you’re ever upset with Gary or me, you might not want to try that here in Birmingham. Let’s just talk it out.

At some point, the focus shifted from the providential rescue of all eight children to an emphasis on John, who adopted for himself the phrase from the Old Testament prophet Zechariah, “A brand plucked from the burning.” This biblical image became part of the Wesley legend, not only as an indication of his providential delivery from the fire but also as a divine designation of some extraordinary destiny for him.

John Wesley believed very early in his life that God chose him for a special purpose. Of course, John was simply following in the footsteps of numerous people in the Bible whom God called, among them Moses, Samuel, Jeremiah and Isaiah. In our scripture for today, the prophet Isaiah describes his call. We don’t know a lot about Isaiah but believe he must have been a nobleman in Jerusalem of high birth and education.

It’s no coincidence, then, that Isaiah’s call takes place in the inner sanctum of the temple in Jerusalem, which may suggest he was a priest as well as a prophet. Isaiah sees God majestically
enthroned, with supernatural beings called seraphs in attendance around God. What is Isaiah’s response to all this? He says, “Woe is me. I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips.”

Isaiah has an intense awareness of his own irregularity, not only of his guilt, but of unfitness to use his mouth in the service of God. Just then one of the seraphs flies to Isaiah, holding a live coal to his lips and saying, “Your guilt has departed, and your sin is blotted out.” After that, God says, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Isaiah responds, “Here am I; send me!”

Isaiah, too, was a brand plucked from the fire, for God chose him to go to his people and speak for God. Isaiah was slightly irregular, just like all the people God chooses to do God’s work in this world. Every one of the prophets in the Old Testament was kind of different and strange. And how about the disciples? They’re often portrayed as a confused and motley crew. They had a personal relationship with their leader, Jesus. Their heads were filled with right thoughts, their intentions honorable. Yet they didn’t get it. They even betrayed their leader.

The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, however, is that these same disciples were the very ones called by God to launch the church. There has never been a time of perfection in the church. Somehow, though, God is able to work through our imperfection, and that, my friends, is incredibly liberating. You and I are free to be ourselves, to strive, to change, to trust and to move out in faith. Just as the disciples were the ones Jesus called two thousand years ago, so we are the ones Jesus calls today.

But there’s something more. The lives coals that touched Isaiah’s lips not only represent cleansing, they represent the fire of the Holy Spirit! When you discover who God wants you to be, you catch on fire, don’t you? Have you ever seen a controlled burn? There are times when fire fighters will intentionally set a building on fire, or they may even set a portion of a forest on fire. In each case, they have a specific purpose in igniting the fire.

The power of God’s call is kind of like a controlled burn, isn’t it? The most incredible experiences happen when you and I have the joy of seeing someone respond to God’s call in their life and do what they are meant to do. Play basketball, conduct an orchestra, write a book, be a mother, teach middle school, bring healing to a cancer patient, pray without ceasing, tutor inner city children, make dinner for someone recovering from surgery, write notes of encouragement. When we see ourselves as brands plucked from the fire and allow the Holy Spirit to move in our lives, when we say, “Here I am, Lord, send me!” that’s when revival happens!

Have you ever been set aflame by the Holy Spirit? Has God’s call become a burning reality in your life? Have you allowed God to turn your slight irregularity into a passion for making a positive difference in the world? One day I was passing through the living room and heard a woman evangelist on TV shouting, “If God doesn’t do it, it won’t happen!” Yes, there’s truth to that statement, but to me, it’s often just the opposite. It we don’t do it, it won’t get done. If we long for something different, we have to make it happen. God will not do what God gives us the power to do. We are brands plucked from the burning, the hands and feet and voice of Jesus. If we don’t use the fire of God’s spirit to bring in God’s kingdom, it won’t come. That’s true for us and for our church.
Out of the 7.32 billion people on this earth, we are the ones. We can’t wait for God to act. We can’t wait for The United Methodist Church to act. We can’t wait for First United Methodist Church to act. We can’t wait for others to act. Our calling is to discover the uniqueness of our own irregularity and then go out and change the world. In his 1994 inaugural address, Nelson Mandela quoted author Marianne Williamson from her book, *A Return to Love*. It’s a powerful statement about the controlled burn that God places deep within each one of our spirits.

> Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves: who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn’t serve the world. There’s nothing enlightened about shrinking, so that other people won’t feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It’s not just in some of us; it’s in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. We are liberated from our own fear; our presence automatically liberates others.

Now I can tell some of you are thinking right now, “That’s all well and good, but God doesn’t call me. I’m a nobody.” Or even, “I don’t want God to call me at all. I’m comfortable the way I am.” Not so! You can’t play it safe any longer.

Our world is waiting for each one of you to say “yes” to God’s call. We are the ones our world has been waiting for. We are the ones Birmingham has been waiting for. We are the ones John Wesley has been waiting for. We are the ones God has been waiting for. Each one of you is a brand plucked from the fire. We are the ones. We are the ones.

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3. Ibid, p. 44.

4. Ibid.