

May 31, 2015
Isaiah 6:1-8

Trinity B
Holiness of God

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father, from our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, our Triune God. Amen.

Today is Trinity Sunday. It's the one day out of the church year that we confess the Athanasian Creed together. It's also the day whether it's in Bible Study, Children's Messages or sermons where pastors try to describe the Trinity. I'm sure most of you have heard how the Trinity is like a three leaf clover. Three leaves but one clover. Or how about the apple: skin, flesh, and core. There is also the three forms of water: vapor, liquid, solid. Here's a new one for you. Take a banana piece, squeeze it in the middle and it'll break into three equal sections. Then there is the ever popular equilateral triangle. Every angle is 60 degrees. And all the sides are the same. As one tries to explain the Trinity, one is unable to completely do it. Each one of these analogies breaks down.

Perhaps you've also seen the equilateral triangle that some pastors use in Confirmation class, such as myself. The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. The Father is not the Son, The Son is not the Spirit, and the Spirit is not the Father. That is all true, it still doesn't explain the Trinity. One will never understand the relationship of the Triune God. The three in one, one in three. It's just not going to happen. One just has to believe and have faith in the Triune God and see them as one of the Greatest Mysteries of our Faith. An 18th century German mystic, Gerhard Tersteegen once said, "A God understood, a God comprehended, is no God." You see there are indeed limits to what our mind can comprehend.

The fact is we have a Triune God who has been essential for our Christian faith for over 2000 years. You see, it's okay that no one can explain the Trinity, it's all a matter of faith.

In our text from Isaiah we encounter the Triune God...actually in all of our readings for today we encounter the Triune God. In all of our readings we encounter the holiness of God. In the Gospel lesson from John 3 we meet Nicodemus, a Pharisee, actually he's a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling class of Pharisees. He is well known to the people. He's also smart enough to know that that Jesus is teaching something spectacular. Nicodemus knows that Jesus is holy. Nicodemus goes to Jesus in humility to learn from Him. Jesus shares with him the spiritual truth that he needs to be born again. Nicodemus truly struggles to understand.

Nicodemus responds to Jesus: "How can a man be born again when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answers Nicodemus saying: "Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of the water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God..."

Nicodemus replies: "How can these things be?" Jesus responds to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"

In this conversation Nicodemus has with Jesus, he encounters the Triune God.

In the reading from Acts we encounter the Triune God and His holiness through the rest of Peter's Pentecost Sermon and the result of hearing that over 3000 people were baptized.

Now we get to our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah, our text for this morning. Isaiah 6 is often coined the Call of Isaiah. You know, it very well could be considered that...or at least could be considered the reaffirmation of His Call. He's already been working as a prophet. IT was the same year that King Uzziah died when Isaiah was given a vision of God in the temple. There is no real description of God in Isaiah's vision beyond seeing the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up...with the train of his robe filling the temple and the Seraphim...angels flying above God. Scripture teaches us that no one...not anyone can see God face-to-face and live. God's holy otherness shall always remain transcendent above and beyond our human experience and comprehension.

In this vision, the Holiness of God is stressed. The seraphim proclaim the sanctus. We sang a version of this a few moments ago... "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty..."

This repetition underscored God's complete holiness...Completely separated from sin. Completely perfect. Separated from His creation in the sense that all creation depends on Him. There's also the complete wisdom, complete knowledge, complete timelessness, complete goodness and so much more. God is holy. As the seraphim sing the sanctus, they make known the covenantal name of the Lord...Yahweh Sabaoth, in the Hebrew. This shows to us His relationship with His chosen people Israel, and also with us.

The repetition of "holy, holy, holy" says perhaps something else as well. Perhaps the Seraphim were singing holy for each person of the Holy Trinity as we confessed a few moments ago in the Athanasian Creed, "The Father is Holy, the Son Holy, and The Holy Spirit Holy; and yet they are not three holies, but one holy."

We sing this song in repetition as well...in the communion liturgy: "With angels and archangels and all the company of heaven we laud and magnify your same saying: "Holy, holy, holy..." Heaven comes to earth at the altar of our God.

As Isaiah is witnessing this, he is overwhelmed. He is witnessing something holy. And the sound of the angels' voices cause the foundations of the thresholds to shake. So Isaiah speaks up: *"Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people with unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts."* Isaiah is afraid for his very life. Isaiah is in the presence of the HOLY ALMIGHTY TRIUNE GOD!!

Isaiah is standing before the very presence of the Holy Lord God Almighty and all he can say is: "I am unclean." He cannot fulfill the demands of God's Law. A man of unclean lips cannot stand before the holiness of God as the Seraphim can. The only appropriate response is "Woe is me, I am lost!" Actually "I am lost" does not do the Hebrew word justice...it actually says in the Hebrews, "I am destroyed." That is the case...Isaiah saw the Holy God...he was going to die...but miraculously God spared his life. For the Seraphim have their eyes covered as well. Isaiah's response is appropriate and correct. The sinner is surely undone!

What happens next is quite remarkable. "One of the Seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

The altar in the Old Testament is the place where sacrifices for sins were made. So it seems all too fitting that the seraph takes one of those burning coals and touches Isaiah on his lips. The sacrifice made there are applied to Isaiah personally.

Both fire and water can be used for good or for ill, to keep alive or to kill. We need fire to heat our homes, to cook our food, to run our cars. And yet fire out of control kills and destroys. Similarly, we need water to stay alive; we humans can only live three or four days without water. But too much water in a flood kills and drowns. God uses both fire and water to kill and make alive. IN Baptism, God drowns the old man, killing our sinful nature. At the same time, through the same water, He makes alive our new man, giving us a righteous nature. In the calling of Isaiah to be His prophet, God killed and destroyed the uncleanness of Isaiah, at the same time, making alive the redeemed person, making alive the man whose sins were atoned.

Isaiah stood before the Almighty God and lived, because His sins were forgiven. As we look at this scene from Isaiah it is a model for our confession and absolution. In the same way as Isaiah proclaimed: "Woe is Me!" as he stood in the presence of the Holy God, we too confess our sins as we come to stand before the Holy God. For us we stand before the altar in the Divine Service and Confess our sins. We deserve nothing but God's punishment and not even the chance to stand before Him. The angel went to the altar and took a hot coal and applied God's forgiveness to Isaiah. The pastor, in the stead of the Holy God absolves you the sinner. He even takes from the altar and places into your lips the body of Christ and the blood of Christ who was sacrificed for you for the forgiveness of sins. You heard the beautiful words of Absolution once already today, but now hear them again... "In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, who is Holy, I forgive you all your sins in the *name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*"

Only after this portion of the Divine Service are we prepared to come before the Holy God in the Introit. This happens because each person now bears the righteousness, the holiness of Christ and can stand comfortably before the Holy Trinity. And that is ultimately why we do care about this event on Trinity Sunday! You and I are like Isaiah,

sinner, who cannot stand before God, and now because of the Holy God, receive His forgiveness.

Our text doesn't stop here...God asks a question: "Whom shall I send and who will go for US?" We realize that God is both one (I) and three (us). And the triune God—who in himself has all power and glory—nevertheless calls His sinful servant to do an eternally important task. Isaiah can now hear God's call and receive it. Why? Because his sins have been atoned for. As a forgiven child of God, Isaiah hears God speaking, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" He receives the Call and answers, "Here am I! Send Me!" Isaiah can now represent God to the Israelite people as a prophet.

God took the initiative in Calling Isaiah. Isaiah did not present himself as ready to work for God, for He wasn't. And certainly not before he was absolved of his sin! Rather, God Called and Isaiah answered!

Having God's Call did not make Isaiah's work any less difficult. In the verses following our reading the Lord would warn how hard the hearts of his people would be: ⁹ *And he said, "Go, and say to this people: "Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive." ¹⁰ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."* ¹ This is indeed what happened. Isaiah's message was largely ignored. Yet the Holy Lord Almighty preserved him almost 60 years, delivering God's message.

And today, God continues to call people for His work. In the present day, God continues to call pastors through His Church for His Work. In fact, God calls every Christian to live a life dedicated to Him, serving God in whatever capacity he has placed you in. It is true...God called you in your baptism to be a son or daughter of God. Many of you were chosen...before you can even remember. God handpicked you to be His servant and now you can respond... "Here am I! Send Me!" We live as the people of God in our communities, schools, places of work, families, homes...and yes even our congregations with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

God has granted each of you with gifts, talents, and abilities—the resources that God has entrusted to our care, our stewardship, to help, serve, and love those around us. Our calling from God is to be His children, His people in the world, wherever He sends us, wherever we happen to be right now, whatever station or position in life we have right now—to be the best husband or wife, best mother or father, son or daughter we can be, to be the best student, teacher, farmer, worker we can be, to be the best pastor or congregation member we can be, because we are God's redeemed children, His light in this dark world.

So you see if you've caught on it's really the holy work of the Holy Triune God that is really important. The Father created the world, created you, sent His Son Jesus to live

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (Is 6:9–10). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

out His life for the sake of the Kingdom and offer His life for the sins of the world for you, who along with the Father sent the Spirit into your life and mine so that we can live out our lives as the best child of God we can be.

Every analogy of the Trinity falls apart somewhere...but when we look at the Triune God for who He is and what He does...we will forever be grateful and when God speaks, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" The only answer we can give is: "Here am I! Send me!" Now this is not done through a burning bush or through a grand vision with a throne and seraphim...but it is done in still a miraculous way, when the Holy and Almighty God comes to you through your Baptisms, through the words of your pastor as He forgives your sins, and through the Body and Blood of Jesus which puts forgiveness of sins into your mouths. It even happens through the voices of others in our lives. "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" "Here am I! Send Me!"

In the name of the Holy and Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of the Triune God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and minds and keep them focused in our Holy and Triune God. Amen.