

Trinity Sunday

Today is Trinity Sunday on the liturgical calendar. It's a day dedicated to celebrating and thinking about the doctrine of the Trinity – the concept of the Three-in-One God we worship, to borrow John Wesley's words – of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. Our Gospel passage this morning examined the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, which occurs one night when Nicodemus sneaks out to see Him. Nicodemus had questions. And Jesus had answers – but they weren't the answers Nicodemus anticipated.

There is a song of the ancient church, known as the *Sanctus* contained in our Great Thanksgiving liturgy for the Sacrament of Holy Communion. It says, in part, "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of Your glory. Hosanna in the highest."¹ I want to spend the rest of our time this morning in the Old Testament, looking at where the *Sanctus* originated from. If you have your Bible or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Isaiah 6:1-8. **Read Isaiah 6:1-8.**

Call stories in the Bible are usually set in everyday places, but Isaiah's occurs in the nation's temple. We're told, "In the year that King Uzziah died," (Isaiah 6:1a), is when Isaiah had this vision. Bible scholars aren't real sure of when that was exactly – they didn't keep records in those days the way we do today. Origen, one of the ancient church fathers reported that Uzziah was known for his extreme wickedness. Except for his comments, and mentions of Uzziah in the Books of Kings and Chronicles, we don't know much about the guy.

King Uzziah

The death of the king brought insecurity to the land and the people. In a way, we saw some of that set in globally in the fall of 2022, when Queen Elizabeth II died. The news stations showed people all over the world – throughout former British colonies – doing all sorts of memorial tributes, crying, and carrying on. The people mourning her loss didn't know her personally, but were really shook up. It seemed like the live coverage of it would never end.

So the people of ancient Israel faced a similar situation. The king has died. Isaiah sees another king seated on a throne. "I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of His robe filled the temple," (verse 1b). This King will never die. He is a vast figure. The hem of His robe fills the emptiness of the temple – can you imagine the size of Him?

¹ "Service of Word and Table I," *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), page 37.

“Above Him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying,” (verse 2), Isaiah writes. These seraphim are angels, who fly around their King. Let’s be crystal-clear about something here folks. Even these angels who are attendants to Almighty God are not privileged to gaze upon the glory of His face. They shield their faces from Him with their wings. “And they were calling to one another: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of His glory,’” (verse 3).

Sanctus

There is the original *Sanctus*. It’s the call of the attendant angels in amazement at the glory of Almighty God. The seraphim have been singing it from the ageless past, and will continue to sing it into eternity. Talk about a vision! Notice what Isaiah says next. “At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke,” (verse 4). Those angelic voices thunder with such force that they shook the building like an earthquake – and smoke – clouds of incense veil Isaiah’s view of things.

The vision leaves Isaiah awestruck and acutely aware of his own sin – his own unworthiness – and of the sin of his people. “‘Woe to me!’ I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty,’” (verse 5). See, Isaiah believes he’s doomed, because he has seen God. In Old Testament times there was this belief that people could not see God and remain alive.

I think this idea, that people can’t live if they see God, originated with Moses. In the Book of Exodus, it’s written:

Moses said, “Now show me Your glory.” And the Lord said, “I will cause all My goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim My name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But,” He said, “you cannot see My face, for no one may see Me and live.” Then the Lord said, “There is a place near Me where you may stand on a rock. When My glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with My hand until I have passed by. Then you will see My back; but My face must not be seen,” (Ex. 33:18-23).

All-Consuming Presence

In that moment Isaiah really believed he was going to die. Instead, he tells us something remarkable. “Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, ‘See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for,’” (Isa. 6:6-7). The seraph flies at Isaiah, holding a burning coal with tongs from the altar of sacrifice, and sears Isaiah’s lips.

This isn't a punishment. It's a purification on the road to being given a calling. It's a commissioning. The seraph declares Isaiah is now free from sin. And the Lord's voice is heard next. "Whom shall I send? And who will go for Us?" (verse 8a). See, in this instant, Isaiah is overhearing a conversation occurring between the Persons of the Godhead – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Plunging into a future he cannot begin to imagine, Isaiah responds – and some commentaries go so far as to say he begs – "Here am I. Send me!" (verse 8b). Now, have you ever experienced something like that? Have you ever realized the amazing thing God has done for you through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and you're so overwhelmed – you're completely consumed with God's presence, that you'd do anything to bring Him joy?

That's what Isaiah experiences here. He doesn't realize he's face-to-face with Jesus, yet, but he's wowed and dazzled at being in the presence of God. This is where the lectionary reading ends today. But if we were to go on in the chapter, we'd see that the Lord tells Isaiah to go and speak to the people – God's people – but also says the prophet's message isn't going to be well-received. People will be resistant to hearing and responding to it.

So What?

We hear about Isaiah and his call on this Trinity Sunday, and may be tempted as the Church to say, "So what?" Our story as the Church here today, and Isaiah's story may be too close for comfort – even if it's close enough to help sanctify us. Isaiah has his temple experience. As the Church, we have our experience of the Trinity. The mystery of which leaves us awestruck – and try as we might – we can't fully comprehend it. The Triune God sets us free from sin, and sets us free for life now and for ever.

In today's Old Testament lesson, Isaiah is summoned into service as a prophet. As the Church, we're called into ministry that doesn't make us popular, but reveals the glory of God throughout all the earth. Isaiah sees that glory "in the year that King Uzziah died," a time when a land and people were wracked with insecurity and instability. What if we're also living in the year that King Uzziah died? Insecurity and instability wrack our land – our world – and its people.

Let's think about this together. Our economic system is a shambles – were ordinary people working full-time cannot get ahead. To use the old saying, "The rich get richer, while the poor get poorer." The industrial waste created by First World countries – those are places like the United States, Canada, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan – are causing long-term environmental problems that will impact people all over the world for generations to come. And then, there's the political culture

of our country, that discourages servant leadership, and often turns its back on the common good.

“So what?” Social renewal – social justice – is rooted in spiritual vision. If that vision is false or fanatical, the results are disastrous. Look at how things are in Iran. It’s not good. But, if spiritual vision is healthy, then social renewal will happen. As followers of Jesus – our spiritual vision must always be fixed on those outstretched arms that were willing to open wide to prove God’s undeserved, unmerited love towards us and all people on the cross of Good Friday.

Keeping God at the Center

At the heart of our vision is the Triune God. We have a God who is worthy. He’s worthy of all our praise. He overflows with justice and mercy. But what happens, with our praise of Him, when we leave the sanctuary and hit the parking lot, the workplace, the grocery store? How do we link our faith in the amazing God we worship in here, with our insecure and suffering society?

Since starting the Course of Study, I’ve seen some diagrams to try to help people like us better understand the Trinity. The Three-in-One God is three Persons of equal dignity. The three are distinct. None is isolated from the others or absorbed by the others. What distinguishes each is the relationship with the others.

Several years ago, while I was in CLM Academy, it was recommended to me to read *The Shack*, by William Young. The book was adapted into a movie and released back in 2017. Now I should say here, I was voluntold to read it by my DCom interviewer at the time. I’m not mentioning any names, but let’s just say, I wasn’t real happy about that. It’s a work of fiction, where this guy drives off into the mountains in the Northwest, gets lost, and ends up at this remote shack.

Inside the shack, he meets an old woman who cooks amazing meals; sees her son come in after chopping down trees in the surrounding forest; and also meets this very ethereal, flighty young woman who also lives there. It was a hard story to read – it made me question things. A recurring thing, though, was that these three persons living in the shack would perform a circular dance, joining hands with each other, spinning through the place. They kept inviting the lost guy into their dance.

In hindsight, I think it’s a pretty good depiction of what God does. The three Persons participate in a graceful, circle dance with one another that’s joyous and endless – beyond our wildest dreams. God dances through our creation, redemption, and our sanctification. And we’re the “lost guy” – you and I are the “lost folks” – who are invited into the circle to join the dance. He invites us to enjoy His hospitality and grace – and then to spread it around everywhere we go.

God is Dangerous

Our Three-in-One God is dangerous. He transforms lives and societies. He is a consuming fire. The implications are huge – because they threaten to overthrow the forces of sin and death. Our praise of God is obedience to truth – it destabilizes idolatry and injustice.

As the Church, we are a prophetic people. We're commissioned for the task of helping others – individuals, families, communities, institutions, even nations – better reflect the image of the God of Life. That being said, it's possible even for followers of Jesus to live in a way that is clueless. Sometimes we fail to let the Light shine through our lives. Our Gospel lesson this morning focused on the discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus.

When Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again, does he get it or not? We aren't told explicitly. Like Isaiah's call, we have to look beyond today's text, to see the bigger picture. Nicodemus shows up later in John's Gospel. He speaks up in John 7(:45-52), and reminds the other religious leaders that just like anyone else, Jesus deserves a fair hearing. This, of course, is rejected. Nicodemus shows up once more in Scripture, once Jesus is dead. He joins Joseph of Arimathea in preparing the body and placing it in the tomb.

By bringing a large amount of spices for the burial, Nicodemus demonstrates generosity and his respect for Jesus. (John 19:38-42). Nicodemus makes an appeal to fairness, and – at considerable expense – he buries the dead, a work of mercy. What if he represents what happens when we get stuck? He's a decent man, but decency's not enough. His world, like ours, needs to hear over and over that a society without mercy is offensive to God and any religion is false unless it works to promote justice.

Nicodemus disappears from Scripture before the Resurrection. Our story, as the Church, depends on the Resurrection. There's no reason for us to be stuck. We can praise God, and bring His Light to bear on every corner of the world. As His followers, we should advocate politics, economics, and care for the creation that reflects our love of God and others. Our society has big problems – but our amazing God, revealed to us most clearly through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is even bigger.

“In the year King Uzziah died...” (Isa. 6:1a). What if, even now, a seraph plummets at us to cleanse our lips with Love's fire and make us a people bold enough to “speak the truth in love?” (Eph. 4:15-29).

Prayer: Through dreams and visions, O God, You broaden the horizon and hope of Your people, that they may discover the meaning of Your covenant, even in the midst of trial and exile. Increase the number of those who believe in Your Word so that all people may joyfully respond to Your call and share in Your promises. Amen.