

It is Trinity Sunday, the only day on the church calendar dedicated to a particular theology! The others are feasts of people and events, so Trinity is unique in that way. I suspect you are familiar enough with the Christian proclamation that God exists both as an undivided Unity and also exists in three distinct persons. For those of you interested in knowing, Trinity Sunday has been fixed on the Christian calendar since the 1300's, after the time that the church had worked through a number of heresies in order to determine what it believed. The ancient tradition revolved simply around Easter and Pentecost, that it was on Easter that we realized God was in Christ in this undeniable way, and it was on the Day of Pentecost the church first understood that God would continue to live in the world through the Spirit.

There is also a modern tradition regarding Trinity, especially in the Episcopal Church. It is to have the Curate or a guest preacher to preach! No kidding. You should be surprised to see me preaching, as this is a day across the church—even when it doesn't fall on Memorial Day Weekend—that no rector preaches. What

follows, of course, is that young priests do their best to explain the mystery of the Trinity in twelve to fifteen minutes. Most of those sermons fall flat and are full of unintended heresy. I know. I have been in that position. The first time I preached on Trinity Sunday was a month before I was ordained as a Deacon. The priest told me it was an honor to be asked to preach on Trinity Sunday, and for some reason I believed him, and then I subjected the faithful to random musings on divine mystery.

In a similar encounter, perhaps my first year as a young rector and with no assistant to whom I could hand off the sermon, I tried my best to offer images of threes that exist differently but together—three candles burning at the same time with indistinguishable light; ice, water, and gas. There was a retired priest, an intellectual type, who was there that day. He sent me a letter commending me for trying to take Trinity Sunday seriously, and then he listed all the heresies that I had included in my sermon and explained why they were heretical! The one about the candles, he wrote, suggests each candle could give light on its own, whereas the

mystery of the Trinity is that each is unrelentingly comingled and cannot exist without the others. The one about water, ice, and gas, is called modalism. As if God could change from one mode to another. You can imagine how I felt. That heresy even had its own name!

Well, with that in mind, I want to suggest today, on this *Feast of the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity* two simple things. The first is that understanding God is always beyond human capacity, but that is by no means a reason or excuse to think that God doesn't want us to give our best efforts to understand, or especially to draw near. The second is this: the pursuit of God, the giving of ourselves to the mystery that is beyond ourselves, ought to leave us confused and dumbfounded, but ironically it seems to me that this pursuit usually allows us more fully to understand ourselves, , not because we have fully understood God, but because that pursuit of God has leaves us with consolation and peace.

I think we see this most clearly in our reading from Isaiah. It is clear based on the language and images

included that Isaiah found himself a bit out of his league in this vision that he had regarding God. The images suggest that Isaiah found himself in a different realm, and that this naturally engendered a sense of fear. That probably was a fair response. Think back to some of the stories of the Old Testament. Aaron's sons brought an offering of strange fire—they brought an unauthorized sacrificed—and God killed them for that. Eli, the high priest who ushered in the age of King David and the Monarchy, his sons were behaving badly in the Temple, running around like boys do, and God killed all of them for it. (I always think of that when I see my own children running around here!) So it is no surprise that Isaiah, when he found himself in the Temple before the throne of God, that he suspected this wasn't going to be a lovely encounter.

And that is an understatement. He is cowering on the ground and bewailing his mortality and the kinds of people from whom he comes, when an angel comes and burns his lips with charcoal (again, lovely isn't the right word), but in the end all of that is an image of comfort

and peace. Who he is, even having encountered the Divine in this overwhelming way, has been accepted and forgiven and atoned for. So much so that when God asks whom God should send, Isaiah reacts in the most unlikely of ways. He should have said thank you, bowed reverently, and scurried to the exit before the angel returned with more burning coals, but he didn't. He was like a child at the circus, standing on his chair and waving at the performers and hoping beyond hope that they would choose him and that he will have the honors of driving the clown car and leading the parade.

He probably should have known better, his lips burning, his mind spinning; but if I am right, the pursuit of God allows us to know ourselves more deeply. I think that is why he didn't even have to lick his lips or swallow hard when he exclaimed back to God, "here I am, send me."

This week, my father sent me an article from Topeka, Kansas, about the Dean who is retiring from Grace Church Cathedral. It turns out that they went to high school together, and that was the connection. Fr.

Lipscomb has retired after twenty years of being dean. So I pulled it up and looked, and it is a beautiful church. Maybe not exactly what Isaiah saw, but impressive, and he had done his part through the years to make it beautiful and full of life, and to make sure that people would continue to encounter the Divine there.

Well, the article said, two years ago he was ready to retire. But they were in the middle of a capital campaign, one of those efforts to keep the Temple lovely, and so they asked him if he would retire two years later. He and his wife were ready to retire, but they said they would stay two more years. And then she was diagnosed with cancer and she died. And as you can imagine, he was a devastated man. They had dreamed of retiring together, and instead he had stayed and was left without her and with time still left to go. He said that Holy Week of this year was perhaps the low point of his life.

And then this happened. On Easter Sunday of this year, at the 8:30 service at Grace Cathedral in Topeka, his assistant was celebrating Eucharist, and while he was

standing at the altar, he had an experience of the Divine. Maybe it was like Isaiah staring up into the portals of heaven. There, completely defeated by the chances and changes of this mortal life, he finally heard God.

He said he could barely stay in church, so overwhelming was the experience. He was relieved that someone else was there to celebrate Eucharist. Among the alleluias, he realized that his wife was in good hands, and that both of them were loved by a power that was beyond his understanding, but yet also close at hand. A love that was stronger than death! That, he mused, was the point of Easter, though it took him a while to understand. That was why they had given of themselves all those years to the work of God, and that is why they went to Kansas, and that is why they agreed to stay. There in the Temple of God he heard a voice relieve him of all that had plagued him and the brokenness of his life.

The article didn't say, but I suspect—if it was during Communion at the altar— it was during the Epiclesis. The epiclesis is when we say, at the altar, Send your holy

Spirit. Send your holy Spirit upon these gifts that they may be for us the body and blood of your Son. And *Sanctify us also.*

*Sanctify us also, that he may dwell in us, and we in him.*

That is what Isaiah prayed. That is what the angel did for him. That is what led Isaiah to say, “here am I send me.” That is what led Fr. Lipscomb to know that his wife had finally reached the holy consolation they had always hoped for in life. It occurs to me that is always why we approach this altar, and we offer ourselves to the great Mystery that is beyond our knowing. Because that Mystery sanctifies us and justifies us and blesses us and offers us a holy consolation in life that we could not attain to on our own. That is what leads us to hope and to pray that beyond the unknowing and mysterious ways of God, that God is with us and is close at hand.

*Grant we beseech thee, that all who partake of this Holy Communion may be filled with thy grace and heavenly benediction, that we may be made one body with him, that he may dwell in us, and we in him. Sanctify us also.*