

Trinity B
Isaiah 6:1-8
May 26, 2024

'Holy' Multiplied By Three
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In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw God sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of God's robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above; 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 GOD of hosts; the whole earth is full of their 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 Sovereign, the God 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 God saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'

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On their way to church school, the teacher asked the children, "Why is it necessary to be quiet in church?" A little girl replied, "Because people are sleeping."¹

¹ Emmitsburg.net: https://www.emmitsburg.net/humor/archives/religious/heaven_1.htm.

Today is Trinity Sunday, the one Sunday of the church year dedicated to a historic doctrine of the church. It has been said that denying the Trinity, one risks losing one's soul, but trying to understand the Trinity, one risks losing one's mind. And I'll add one of my own: trying to preach on the Trinity, one risks losing one's job!

It is true though that preaching on this topic is somewhat fraught. All too often, preachers resort to trivializing images to help get their point across. The Trinity is like a clover—three leaves yet one plant. The Trinity is like an egg—yolk, white, and shell. The Trinity is like the states of water—liquid, solid, vapor. And so on.

As I was reading for this sermon last week, I came across a particularly daunting piece of advice. The author, another minister, was bemoaning the fact that most sermons preached on Trinity Sunday would in fact fail the test of orthodoxy. He concludes his tirade simply, “Dear preachers out there, don't be heretics.”² I can make no such promises, but I'll try.

The first recorded use of the word ‘Trinity’ comes from Theophilus of Antioch in the 2nd century and defines God, the Logos (Word), and Sophia (Wisdom). Tertullian, writing in the early 3rd century, was first to defend the doctrine of the Trinity, explicitly defined as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And during the first four centuries of the church, the doctrine was further developed and defined, usually in response to claims deemed heretical. Pope John XXII was the first to order a feast for the church on the first Sunday after Pentecost in 1334 and the feast day was elevated to its current status by Pope Pius X in 1911.

While the word ‘Trinity’ is to be found nowhere in the Bible, it is used to describe one God in perfect unity that exists in three distinct and equal

² Evan D. Garner. “Heresy Sunday,” Evandgarner.blogspot.com, May 26, 2015: <https://evandgarner.blogspot.com/2015/05/heresy-sunday.html>.

persons. Trinitarian formulas are commonly invoked here at New England Church in the benediction, during baptism, during the doxology, and in hymn-singing. The doctrine of the Trinity simply maintains that while distinct persons, the Creator, Christ, and Spirit are actually one God, not three.

For more than a millennium, Christians have accepted the mystery of the Trinity on faith. Or they've reasoned their way through it the way theologians have done, people like Tertullian, Athanasius, Luther, Calvin, or, writing in modern times, Sarah Coakley. Or, they've discarded it the way a number of denominations and theologians have done. Chances are, there are a few of each right here in this room.

Today, though, I'm not going to tell you what to believe about the Trinity. I do want to suggest that whatever you do believe about it, the Trinity can serve as a helpful lens through which to see and better appreciate the world around us and the holiness within it.

In our text from the prophet Isaiah, singing serpentine seraphs flutter about the divine throne intoning, "Holy, holy, holy is the GOD of hosts; the whole earth is full of their glory." In a unique way, looking through the Trinity as a lens allows us to see with new eyes and maybe even join their song.

As we experience the creative God in the patient process of evolution, the ever-expanding grandeur of the cosmos, and the infinite complexity of the smallest molecule, can we call it anything but holy?

As we see the human God—the one who represents the best of us—in the compassionate responses of caregivers, the boundless insights of beautiful minds, the indefatigable strength of teachers and those who raise kids, the tenderness of lovers, or the wonder of children, can we call it anything but holy?

As we see the spirit God in newness and possibility and the wild, blowing where it will and sparking change and growth and hope can we call it anything but holy?

The Trinity is a fine doctrine, if ever there was one, but as a lens for seeing the world, it opens us to the truth of holiness all around us—even in us. It doesn't wipe away pain or disaster or injustice, but it does help us see through it to what could be, and like the divine one in Isaiah's prophecy it asks us, "Who will go for us?" Who will help the world and its people see the holiness that is really at their core? Who will help them see better and be better? And isn't that really the question for all matters of faith: what does my believing this or that thing inspire me to do or be in and for the world?

Whatever you believe about the Trinity, this week, hold the Trinity up as a lens to see the holy in the messy world we live in and the messy people we live with and the messy person that stares back at us in the mirror. Let's see the creative God, and the human God, and the spirit God in all of it and all of us. And then, when the question comes to us, and it will: "Who will go for us?" May we be ones willing to say, "Here am I; send me!" Amen.