

Holy Trinity Sunday. May 27, 2018. Dungeness Valley Lutheran Church, Sequim, WA. Isaiah 6:1-8, Romans 8:12-17, John 3:1-17.

Isaiah 6:1-8

6In 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. 2Seraphs 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. 3And one called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.’

4The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. 5And 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!’

6 Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 7The 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.’ 8Then 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!’

John 3:1-17

3Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.2He came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.’ 3Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’ 4Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’ 5Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above.” 8The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’ 9Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’ 10Jesus answered him, ‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?’

11 ‘Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. 12If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the

wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

16 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

17 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

A civilian first responder on 9/11/2001 said he was called by Allah to run into the burning building to help rescue survivors. As he ran in, a firefighter made the sign of the cross over him and blessed him in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Later, his injuries were cared for by a Jewish hospital.

GOD – the God greater than any religion -- was with the man. God was with him in the faith in which he grew up, in the blessing of the firefighter and in the care of the doctors and nurses – of many faiths – at the hospital.

The concept of “God” is unimaginable. The name “God” is inscrutable to us, although we use any name with reverence, seeking to “keep it holy” as we are commanded. When I am asked to “explain God” I find it impossible, so I use some kind of hand motions that indicate that I cannot even begin such a task. Hand motions that indicate wonder, humility, awe.

We would like to control such a being, such a force, to, as some have said, “put God in a box.” Having a name gives a sense of comfort, even if it’s a fearful name. Knowing the name of your disease or your enemy or even your customer service representative gives us a sense of control over that entity.

Names also can offer a sense of intimacy. At various times when I was raising my children, they could have called me “birth-giver” or “household manager” or “wage-earner” – all true things about me – but they preferred to call me “Mom.” I preferred it too.

Jesus could have called “God” many things: Almighty One, Lord of All, Powerful Creator, Holying Spirit. But, as we are told by those who wrote down the Gospels, he preferred “Abba,” the “Daddy” form of Father.

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An old man was dying. His priest came to the bedside and asked, “Do you believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit?” The man rolled his eyes and said, “I’m dying and you ask me riddles?”

We could ask ourselves the same thing. The world in many forms is dying, and we try to puzzle out the name or names for God!

In the first reading we heard today, Isaiah has a vision of “God” high on a throne surrounded by angels singing “Holy, Holy, Holy.” In the vision, only the HEM of “God’s” robe filled the huge temple....the rest of the garment must have stretched across the universe. An apt metaphor for us: we see perhaps only the hem – if that – of God’s robe of loving power, gracious mercy, ongoing blessing. Isaiah’s reaction to the vision is to confess his sins and those of his people. At that, the envisioned angel touches Isaiah’s lips with holy fire and offers forgiveness and a call to action.

On this festival of the Holy Trinity, we too sing “holy, holy, holy.”

The three-fold holiness of God: Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier. Or, if you wish, “Abba”, or “sweet Jesus our brother” or “Comforter.”

We name these three aspects of God in our Creeds. The Athanasian Creed, from the 6th century, includes these lines:

The Father [is] incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible. The Father [is] eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Spirit eternal. And yet they are not three eternals but one eternal. Not three Gods, but one.

We generally use the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds, most usually here the Apostles’. Many of you also hold to the Creed you helped put together in years gone by which we have used frequently this past year. The creeds all have 3 parts, but are one creed – a little like the Trinity.

So why even have a creed? Some have suggested that these historical and long-accepted documents unite us with Christians throughout the world. Others say that tradition requires it; they are indeed in our church constitution. Others say that we proclaim these words of faith to one another because we love one another. Others say these creeds keep us from forgetting the basics. Just about every line of the creeds can offend someone....why does “God” come at the end of time to judge us if Jesus offered forgiveness? And why do we keep flogging Pontius Pilate every week? And if God is truly almighty, why all the misery in God’s created world?

Quick thoughts: God judges because what we do matters. This doesn’t wipe out forgiveness. Pontius Pilate is there to put Jesus’ suffering into a historical

framework, making sure we know Jesus as a real human person. God's might and love seem incompatible with the misery of the world – and God asks us to address that misery, much of which is of our own making.

Good, even great, books about the creeds are available if you wish to read them. Study never hurts; we don't park our brains at the door when we come to worship.

We may choose to speak these credal words in solidarity with other Christians, especially with those who have gone before us. We may choose to understand the riddles metaphorically or as ways people came to try to explain the unexplainable, to put words around the mystery, to comfort themselves with certainties.

But back to Isaiah's vision of the Holy – Holy - Holy. Norman Habel, aged Lutheran seminary professor, has mused on this text: "I am intrigued by the cries of the seraphim. They announce that the visible presence of God "fills" Earth. And that announcement is amazingly radical, a mystery worth exploring. The visible Presence, which was once thought to fill the holy of holies [in the ancient temple], is said to fill the entire planet! Does that mean that, in some sense, our planet is a sanctuary filled with a radiant divine presence? Is our planet like a holy of holies in the cosmos? Is our planet permeated with the spiritual, alive with holiness? That is a mystery worth exploring." [i]

Yes! And how does one do such exploring of the mystery of "God?"

We get a clue from the Gospel lesson for today: the story of Nicodemus, a learned man, who comes one night to talk with Jesus – Jesus who was without a home, who said he had nowhere to lay his head. Jesus welcomes Nick but doesn't shy away from the mystery, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (John 3:8). He tells Nicodemus he would be born again, born from above, born of water and the spirit – he would have a new outlook on God and on the world if he wanted to be part of the kingdom, the kingdom, of God. Jesus sees a life totally changed, turned from focus on oneself to focus on God with actions directed toward the good of the neighbor.

Then Jesus left Nicodemus and us with these awesome words, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

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We may fuss a little about the wording of the creeds and about traditions. We puzzle over ancient doctrines, such as the Trinity. We wonder why bad things happen to good people and we pray for those people. We try to discern the best way to serve our neighbors: build affordable housing or shelters? Give out food or money? How to work for peace. How to feed the world, provide medical care for all, and on and on. All these things occupy us; they are important. But we can't address those questions apart from the one verse that declares that God so loved the world. That this mysterious God loves You and You and You. That you can be forgiven for your self-centeredness and you can be empowered to serve your neighbor with gusto and with joy.

“Here am I; send me!” were the words of Isaiah at the end of his vision; they were the words of the 9/11 first responder, blessed in three faith traditions; and they are the words of each of you, as the Spirit moves you.

Blessed be the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the God of love beyond our comprehension – and the God of the universe who desires intimacy with each of us: Abba, sweet Jesus our Brother, and our Inspiration and Comfort. Amen.