

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

Last week we celebrated Pentecost, which commemorates the gift of the Holy Spirit and the birthday of the church. And this is always followed by the Festival of the Holy Trinity. This is the one week each year in which a Sunday is devoted to a doctrine of the church rather than to an event in its history. And yet, it is not an easy one for, while the doctrine of the Trinity is foundational to our faith, it is beyond both our understanding and our ability to explain. Or, as Martin Luther put it, “To deny the Trinity endangers your salvation; to try to comprehend the Trinity endangers your sanity.” Therefore, it seems to me that the Trinity is more to be experienced than learned, for God is totally other and completely awesome.

We are given a taste of this awesomeness in our reading from Isaiah. This is his call narrative, in which he has a vision of God’s throne room. Upon finding himself there among the heavenly beings and in the very presence of God, who is so vast that just the hem of God’s robe fills the whole space, Isaiah recognizes his own smallness, sinfulness, and unworthiness.

Commentator Scott Hoezee writes: “It was the year King Uzziah died. Or, it was the year President Kennedy died. Or it was the year 9/11 rattled the world to its core. It was the year when things fell apart, when foundations were shaken, when the markets crumbled, when all that had once been familiar now seemed long ago and far away. It was the year King Uzziah died.

It was a bad time, a shaky time, a frightening time. But then suddenly Isaiah, probably as preoccupied by this world’s news and events as was anyone else in Israel back

then, had his vision wrenched to heaven. On the one side was King Uzziah and the rest of what constituted normal, everyday life in this world. It all seemed large and important until he saw God high and lifted up, and suddenly Isaiah found all of his perceptions and priorities re-aligned.

Suddenly he felt unworthy, unclean. And when he looked around him at the rest of his society in the light that was streaming at him from God's throne, he knew that the rest of the world was likewise unclean, messed up, tawdry, and sinful. So he confessed. He cried out the truth of his condition. And God forgave him. God cleansed him with fire and then gave him a job to do."

And here we have the gist of the Gospel – God forgives us, cleanses us, and gives us a job to do. But how many of us get caught up in the feelings of unworthiness and shrink away from God's presence out of fear of not being accepted? One of the contemporary Christian songs I like is "How Can it Be?" by Lauren Daigle, because it speaks the truth about our feelings of unworthiness and God's amazing grace and love. The lyrics to the first stanza are "I am guilty – ashamed of what I've done, what I've become. These hands are dirty – I dare not lift them up to the Holy One." I'm sure I'm not the only one who can relate to that. But the good news is that that is not the whole story, for as the song goes on to say, "I've been hiding, afraid I've let you down, inside I doubt that you still love me – but in your eyes there's only grace now."

Isaiah experienced this grace in his vision, as his sin was blotted out by the seraph touching his lips with a coal, and then he was able to hear and respond to God. We, too, experience this grace, thankfully not by being touched by a hot coal, and we are reminded

of this in worship as we confess our sins and receive absolution – the assurance that we are also forgiven. Then we hear God’s word for us and are reminded of the mission we have been given before being sent out, fed and strengthened, into the world.

As a call narrative, Isaiah’s is unique because he was not sought out and called; instead, God asked “Whom shall I send?” and Isaiah responded “Here am I; send me.” In other words, he volunteered to become a prophet without even knowing the message God wanted someone to deliver. Astoundingly, there is only one other place in Scripture, where someone answers ‘Here I am’ to a call that has not been extended, and in that case, it was God who said: “I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, ‘Here I am, here I am’ to a nation that did not call on my name” (Isaiah 65:1).

And here we see God desiring to be in relationship with the people He has created. This is truly remarkable when we take seriously who God is – the one who created us and everything else and the one the seraphs sing their praises to. We join in the seraph’s song each week as part of our communion liturgy. This song, called the Sanctus, is an acclamation from the congregation honoring the presence of the Lord. It comes after the Dialogue, in which we greet one another, lift our hearts to the Lord, and give the Lord our thanks and praise, and the Preface, which is a prayer of acknowledgment for what God has done. On Holy Trinity Sunday, the Preface I am most familiar with speaks of God revealing “the glory of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit: equal in majesty, undivided in splendor, one Lord, one God, ever to be adored ...” which orients us to the day and names the Trinity. And, in response to that naming, we sing, “Holy, holy, holy

Lord.” By singing the seraphs’ own song, the congregation is imaged as surrounding the throne of God, which is, of course, exactly what we are doing at worship: standing before, beside, and around the signs of God’s grace.

But our God is not only all powerful and wholly other – our God is also deeply relational, both within the Trinity and with us. We read of God’s desire to be in good relationship with us throughout the Scriptures, but this desire took on a whole new meaning when God sent Jesus to this broken world to show us what God’s love really looks like.

And yet, despite Jesus coming and living among the people, it was still not easy for any of them to really understand who He was or what He was trying to teach them. This is clearly the case in the story of Nicodemus’ encounter with Jesus. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus was a learned man and a member of the so-called Temple Authorities – those who opposed and conspired against Jesus at every turn. And yet, Nicodemus was also intrigued – curious enough about this man who had been teaching and doing signs all over the nation, that he took the risk of seeking Jesus out under the cover of darkness. This may have been done on the sly, but it is still Nicodemus’ way of answering Jesus’ call to “come and see.”

And in coming to see, he learns just how limited and literal his understanding truly is. For, when Jesus speaks in a way that could be interpreted in multiple ways – saying that it is necessary to be born again, or born from above, in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven – Nicodemus hears it only as needing to be physically born again. So, he brings the conversation to the level of the absurd, wondering how he, a grown man, is to re-enter

the womb. And here, Jesus actually calls him on his lack of understanding in one of the harshest comebacks we ever hear Him utter, asking, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” But we can certainly understand Jesus’ frustration with this level of incomprehension.

Nevertheless, Jesus did not give up on him, but tried again, this time putting it in terms that Nicodemus, a scholar of the Hebrew scriptures, might more easily relate to – the story of Moses lifting up the serpent so that those who looked upon it would be healed from the snake bites they were experiencing. Notice that God did not remove the snakes, but instead provided the means of healing – just as Jesus did not simply remove all sin from the world, but instead gives us a way through it.

So, Jesus told Nicodemus that “just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” In other words, just as the people had to look to the serpent for healing, we need to look to the cross of Jesus. Now, of course, this would probably not have helped as much as Jesus might have hoped, for even His disciples did not yet know about the coming crucifixion and resurrection.

And, again, Jesus did not wait for Nicodemus to understand everything he was being told, but instead went on to say those words that have become some of the most well-known and well-loved in the Bible, “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.” And the good news does not end there, for Jesus also said that, “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.”

Now, we don't know how Nicodemus reacted to these words or what he did after his meeting with Jesus, for the only other time we hear about him is in John 19, after Jesus has been crucified. Pilate gave Joseph of Arimathea permission to take away the body of Jesus, and then we read that, “Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews.” So, apparently, Nicodemus did become a believer – we just don't know if he had been living like one or standing up for Jesus with the Pharisees up to that point.

Regardless, Jesus' words and His willingness to die on the cross for us show the tremendous depth of His love and grace. And we are reminded that we, like Isaiah, are fully aware of our sinfulness and unworthiness to be forgiven and loved by our all-powerful and awesome Triune God. But the God who created us loves us anyway! And God proved that love again by sending the Holy Spirit to live, not just among us, but within our hearts so that we would be in constant, growing relationship with Him. In fact, our relationship is such that, as Paul wrote to the church in Rome, we have been adopted by God and made joint heirs with Christ. It sounds almost too good to be true, doesn't it?

The incredible nature of this relationship may be what makes it so hard for us to grasp the full nature of any person of the Trinity, including the Spirit who lives within us. Sadly, despite the intimate closeness we share with the Holy Spirit, this person of the Trinity may be the least understood of the three. In his book *Your Father Loves You*, James

Packer offers one explanation for our lack of knowledge about the Holy Spirit. He writes: “The Holy Spirit’s distinctive role is to fulfill what we may call a floodlight ministry in relation to the Lord Jesus Christ. When floodlighting is well done, the floodlights are placed so that you do not see them; in fact, you are not supposed to see where the light is coming from; what you are meant to see is just the building on which the floodlights are trained. The intended effect is to make it visible when otherwise it would not be seen for the darkness, and to maximize its dignity by throwing all its details into relief so that you can see it properly. This perfectly illustrates the Spirit’s new covenant role. He is, so to speak, the hidden floodlight shining on the Savior.

Or think of it this way. It is as if the Spirit stands behind us, throwing light over our shoulder on to Jesus who stands facing us. The Spirit’s message to us is never, ‘Look at me; listen to me; come to me; get to know me,’ but always, ‘Look at him, and see his glory; listen to him and hear his word; go to him and have life; get to know him and taste his gift of joy and peace.’ The Spirit, we might say, is the matchmaker, the celestial marriage broker, whose role it is to bring us and Christ together and ensure that we stay together.”

But it goes ever deeper than this, for, in addition to keeping us in close relation to Christ, the Holy Spirit also acts as our Advocate and Guide, standing with us and leading us in our mission to share God’s love with all those around us. Given all of this, my prayer is that we will recognize the gift of love and forgiveness that we have been given and volunteer for God’s mission with the curiosity and openness of Nicodemus and the eager enthusiasm of Isaiah. Amen.