

Lord of Host

Isaiah 6:1-8

Today is Trinity Sunday. The Trinity is the mysterious dynamic of God's inner being. The doctrine of the Trinity is notoriously hard to understand. It is a human attempt to explain who the Christian church has understood God to be, on the basis of Scripture. The biblical bases for the doctrine are important. They are pointers to what the church has been led to say in confessing that God is one and that this one God is three persons at the same time: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is known to us in three persons— all of whom are equally "God" and who, biblically and historically, are distinctively at work in the world. God's work in "three persons" is still the work of the "one God," since the Godhead cannot be "divided" or "separated." The three are one; the One is three. God is one God in three persons. How this is possible, is a mystery. Yet the church affirms the Trinity as its basic belief about God.

Trinity Sunday invites us to attend to many facets of God's nature, but today we will focus on only one of them. The text from Isaiah 6:1-8 emphasizes God's radical holiness. In his vision Isaiah encounters the first person of the Trinity, the Lord of Hosts, the Divine Other lifted so high in glory and splendor that even the seraphs must cover their faces. "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;" they proclaim, "the whole earth is full of [God's] glory."

These first eight verses of chapter 6 describe one of the best known of Isaiah's prophetic visions. Summoned to the throne of God and surrounded

by the awe and terror of the Lord, Isaiah is struck with the realization of his own unworthiness and that of his people. He is not worthy to stand before the Lord, yet here he is in the presence of the Lord. He knows he is unworthy to serve, yet what other option does he have here at the throne of God? This is not the time to say no; it is the time, in Isaiah's words, to say woe. "Woe is me! I am lost." There is a deep mystery at work here, and it profoundly upsets Isaiah's equilibrium. But in the upsetting, Isaiah is able to confess his sin, be cleansed of his guilt, and receive a clean heart. Only then can he hear God's call with clarity.

Isaiah's vision is intended for earthly readers just like us, and the narrative accentuates at least three characteristics of God's relationship with us: God encounters us in our historical context, God's word is revealed in our worship, and God calls us to serve.

First, the importance of Isaiah's own particular context is noted in the very first verse: he received the vision in the year that King Uzziah died. According to 2 Chronicles 26, Uzziah was the king who ruled Judah for fifty-two years, bringing the kingdom to new heights of economic prosperity, military power, and political influence. But Uzziah forgot that he was an earthly king. He challenged the sacred worship of the temple and lost. As mighty as he was, Uzziah was no match for the Lord, and his arrogance led to his death. Prophets are often called to speak the word of the Lord to those who have forgotten the distinction between holy and human.

Our text suddenly shifts from the historical reference to Uzziah to the heavenly throne of God: God is holy; we are not. Isaiah can see from his location into the throne room above. Isaiah is surrounded by the smoke from burning sacrifices and incense, and by the noise from a festive throng of worshipers. Then this sad realization hits Isaiah with overwhelming force:

we are sinners, we dwell among sinners, and we live in sin-filled times. Too often we do not recognize this until it is forced upon us, and there is nothing like an encounter with the divine to shatter our self-centeredness and bring us to our knees in lament. Yet it is this realization that opened Isaiah to the possibility of forgiveness. He was touched by divine intervention and made clean. Isaiah was then free to answer when God calls.

Second, Isaiah's journey through confession, forgiveness, and commission occurred in the context of the worship of the Holy. Isaiah described the Lord of Hosts as completely and divinely Other, the God who alone is worthy of eternal adoration, glory, and praise. Other prophets have had similar visions at the foot of God's throne (1 Kgs. 22, Ezek. 1-2, Rev. 4), and all share a similar theme: wherever God dwells, there is worship; God's praise never ceases. In the Christian faith, we understand our worship to be a place where God is revealed to us through Word and sacrament. Indeed, the order of our Lord's Day worship is similar to that of Isaiah's experience before the Lord. We come together to praise the almighty God, confess our sin, and seek forgiveness. We ask God to allow us to hear the Word with discernment and respond to the good news. Our worship matters, just as it matters in the courts of heaven. The elements of our worship—gathering, praising, confessing, praying, hearing, and responding—are all appropriate responses to the holy God who claims us.

Third, Isaiah's encounter with the living God teaches us that there is no way to know God without being changed. This kind of transformation almost always leads to service, to work and witness in God's name. This requires that Christians, you and I, practice a discipline of prayerful discernment, of listening for God's call in their lives. This is not just an

individual endeavor but also the corporate practice of a worshipping community.

Isaiah's vision is the pattern of our own worship: praise, confession/forgiveness, listening to the Word, and responding to the Word. Jean works diligently to make sure our hymns and prayers are chosen to follow that movement. This month we have used a prayer of confession to begin our worship. We are invited, before God, to confess our sin and the sin of the world. In our prayers of concern we name the sins of our time, just as Isaiah did when he condemned Judah for her acts of political arrogance, spiritual pride, and economic injustice. Our sermons and benedictions are to give assurance of pardon that are as strong as, if not stronger than, the confessions. Think of the image of the seraph cleansing Isaiah's lips with a live coal. That is how vibrant and powerful God's forgiveness is. God's forgiveness draws us into service rather than away from it. The response to the Word should include not only our prayers of concern in worship, but continued prayers of intercession that draw our attention to the needs of the world beyond our own. This Sunday, during our congregational meeting, we will elect officers who have said "yes" to specific ministries and have recognized their particular callings within the community of faith. **Kristin Emery Saldine**

Charles Swindoll tells a story in the book *Stories of the Heart*, about how God works in preparing us for ministry. This can sometimes be painful, as we are filled, hammered, melted, and molded into instruments of service to God, the church and the world. The Lord of Host is the Master. It is God who calls us to worship, who calls us to confess, and who cleans us and make of able to serve our communities.

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