

Holy Trinity 2021  
(John 3:1-17; Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 8:12-17)

Holy Trinity Sunday can come across as trying to “peek up God’s skirts,” as one professor referred to the probing task.

It can seem like guesswork of trying to navigate through the dense fog of mystery, putting together pieces that don’t quite fit—three in one, but not three gods, still only one God. In more skeptical moments, rather than sticking our nose where it doesn’t belong, we may say it’s all just a human project anyway, that 1700 years ago committees decided what God was.

Given that these doctrines were debated and formulated later, certainly we can have the feeling we’re reading into things with our Bible passages. The Gospel of John almost certainly didn’t have a concept of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And yet for this Trinity Sunday, we’re given a passage from chapter 3 with language of God’s only begotten Son and being born of the Spirit, seeming to cherry-pick what we hear as pointing to the Trinity.

Of course, rather than us deciding on the Trinity and then hunting for things to support it, another interpretation is that God’s identity was revealed for us in and through the Bible, leaving at least indicators of Trinity.

Still, I wonder why the Isaiah passage was chosen for today. It doesn’t seem to have those hints of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or of God, Word, and Breath, no Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. About all I can detect of Trinity is the threefold Holy, Holy, Holy. It seems a stretch to say that those angels are singing one Holy to each of the three persons of the Trinity. What it probably means is super extra holy. If one Holy is already holy, and Holy Holy is even holier, then Holy Holy Holy is holy guacamole holiest.

In practical terms, that meant mega Off Limits: Do Not Touch. Holiness was not supposed to come into contact with mundane messy humanity. Our ordinary lives are the reverse of God’s reserved being, and humans shouldn’t dare approach. Thus Isaiah’s fearful cry, “I’m doomed!” He wasn’t

supposed to be there in God’s presence, with holiness so overpowering it could obliterate him, end his puny plain life.

That may not be our typical sense of God. We tend to think we can approach God. In our declarations that God accepts you just as you are, we avoid the distinctions that would put us distant and separate from God.

We may be especially uncomfortable with a concept of fearing God. We probably want to qualify it as awe or reverence or respect. But Isaiah is just plain scared. He recognizes the danger of approaching holiness. “I’m a man of unclean lips” and my own smirking holy guacamole line puts me at risk. Such snark is not worthy of God, and God’s holiness would have reason not to allow it, to displace me and cast me even farther from God’s presence.

Pausing to appreciate that holiness, our precarious posture is probably of supplication, to approach more cautiously. We try to clean up our act.

That’s still embedded in our worship practices. Notwithstanding those of you who are lackadaisically and inattentively engaged in this while in your pajamas at home, we’d typically devote ourselves to being devout, accustomed to dressing up, putting on our Sunday best, cleaning up our appearance as a symbol of our inner self. Historic church buildings have been lofty and grand, conveying this enormity and hushing our unclean lips. We try to treat each other a little better. We bow our heads in prayer, posing in humility to come into God’s presence. We sing praise that offers acclaim, at least mouthing the right words. Even our offerings—now mostly thought of as funds for operating the church budget—still probably have some connection to bringing something valuable to God, to offer our best. We try to put our best foot forward in worship—a word that is from Old English “worthy-ship,” for how we are worthy to enter God’s Holy, Holy, Holy presence.

The thing is, we’re not too good at cleaning up our act. We can make a brief show of it on Sunday morning. I know I can barely muster a little bit of

holiness, and am far from Holy, Holy, Holy. If that's what it takes, I am indeed doomed.

Well, Isaiah doesn't even get a chance to clean up his act. He's still realizing the risk when an angel flies up and jabs a burning coal into his mouth, a representation of being purged and prepared for God.

Your own purging comes not with fire but with water, as in baptism you were cleaned up and prepared for God. Especially clear if you were baptized as a baby, there's nothing you did to get yourself ready. Your parents and a pastor might have seemed to be in the role of the angels, flying in to help set you right for God.

The Isaian angels share some of the fearfulness. They aren't cute cherub baby angels or pretty ladies in flowing white gowns. More a sci-fi image, these are winged serpents. Phrased here as flying "flaming creatures," the word *seraph* is Hebrew for "burning." With serpents, fiery also meant poisonous. That's a worthwhile image of Isaiah's fearful predicament; approaching God is like being surrounded by poisonous snakes, a swarm of water moccasins and cobras and diamondbacks.

In a coincidence, that also appears with our John reading, referring to the book of Numbers, a story when the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness, and were indeed surrounded by poisonous serpents. Moses, as the angelic go-between, was told to make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole, so that people who were bitten and whose lives were threatened could look at the bronze serpent and have relief, be purged of the problem, be saved.

John says that's what Jesus is like, as he is lifted on the cross. When your life is threatened, poisoned, infected, you look to Jesus on the cross and find relief, life, salvation.

That is again striking because, in that conversation, Nicodemus had been asking how to get closer to God, essentially what he needed to do to clean up his act. He was pondering how to be born again, how to have the fresh start, knowing it was as impossible as climbing again into his mother's womb.

But it's not humble origination. It's not meek supplication. It's not avoiding doom and condemnation by cleaning up our acts enough and watching our mouths. The coal is offered to touch your lips. Your baptism purges you before you even know you need it. God sends the Son that you may have life. The opposite of separation keeping you out, you are adopted in as an heir in God's family. The Holy Holy Holy unapproachable God approaches you, comes near to you. You don't make yourself worthy in worship. Your worthy-ship comes from God.

And this holy-making God spreads it out far beyond you. Isaiah sees we need not hunt to peek up God's skirts, since God's robe spreads and drapes filling the world, even while the seraphim are singing "the whole earth is filled with God's glory." And John sees that as we are scared and fearful, as we need help and salvation, it is not escaping out of existence to some special sanctuary, but exactly into our midst, God abundantly sends the Son by the power of the Spirit for life. Because God so loves the world.