

Loving a Mystery

from the pulpit of
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Isaiah 6:1-8

¹In 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!”

⁶Then 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!”

Romans 8:12-17

¹²So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh — ¹³for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ — if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

Please pray with me: *Oh living Word, dwell here. In our hearing, in our speaking, in our living. Abide with us and us in you. May my words decrease so that yours may increase. May you bless our common work this morning, our Rock and our redeemer. Amen*

Let's be honest...talking about God...can be... well... difficult. I'm serious, it's not easy to talk about the divine, Holy One in every day conversation. Sometimes we use image and metaphors: *Light. Love, Triune, Lion of Judah, King of Kings, Lord of Lords*. Sometimes we use poetry: *Immortal, invisible, God Only Wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes, most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days, Almighty, Victorious, thy great name we praise*. I promise it will sound even better when we sing it later.

Sometimes when we talk about God it sounds like a vocabulary lesson: *Immutable, immanence, incomprehensible, incorporeal, infinite, omnipotent, omniscient* ...I know it's a tongue twister isn't it?!

Sometimes we get caught up in the "how" how we even begin, in the very methodology of such a conversation:

Do we only talk about the communicable attributes—those that humans might also possess, do we focus on the incommunicable attributes—those that humans cannot. Do we follow the via negativa, apophatic theology focusing on the things we cannot be said about God or do we head in the positive with Cataphatic theology... and at this point my head hurts! We make it pretty complicated.

Talking about God can be well.... difficult. If that wasn't complicated enough, we're celebrating Trinity Sunday; and when you throw the trinity into the mix, the whole conversation gets really wonky. Because on days like today, we have to come face to face with that holy mystery: the Trinity: knowing and understanding that the God who is one is also three, and the three: Father Son and Holy Spirit are also one.

It is a mystery that the church has struggled to define. From the very beginning when the first Christians realized that the story of Jesus Christ meant that we fundamentally understood God in a new way, we've been trying to explain this complex reality. We've tried all sorts of things: clover leaves, eggs, apples, water, words, relationships... We keep searching for the perfect analogy that will make God easy, that will make

God make sense, make God a little more accessible. When we try to do this, when we wrestle with doctrine, to find the perfect words, sometimes even the perfect vowels within a single word, we start to get lost, we get tired.

People start to feel burned out, tired, as one of my confirmation students exclaimed, “Can you actually say ANYTHING about God?” We start getting distracted as the sentences start to contradict each other and the nuances start to seem almost like mental showmanship and less like a thoughtful consideration of a God who loves.

That’s what my first year of seminary felt like, as people rushed around worried about the right words, the perfect words. It was more of a game than a devotion.

And Yet. And Yet... there is something about this mystery that asks us to consider, to imagine, to think deeply. Augustine—in his seminal work-- *De Trinitate*—on the Trinity, Augustine says this:

*“And I would make this pious and safe agreement, in the presence of our Lord God, with all who read my writings, as well in all other cases as, above all, in the case of those which inquire into the unity of the Trinity, of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit; because in no other subject is error more dangerous, or inquiry more laborious, or the discovery of truth more profitable.”*¹

Dangerous, laborious and profitable sounds more like a trailer of an Indiana Jones Movie, something exciting should happen when we approach the trinity that way! But how do we start? Face to face with a mystery. How do we stop ourselves from throwing our hands in the air and giving up? How is it that God who is one is also three? How can three be distinct and yet, perfectly unified?

¹ *De Trinitate*, Book 1, chapter 3.5

Risking a little heresy here on Trinity Sunday, I want us to pause in that wondering and start a little closer to home, how do we start talking about God.

I worry that sometimes all the shelves that groan under the weight of theology and tradition begin to weigh us down; they start to build up more barriers than doorways, they actually stop us from knowing and talking about God. It's kind of like learning to ride a bike. If you're just getting started, and suddenly start fiddling with the gears, and you are no longer moving, but rather crashed on the ground. There is no forward movement then. So we're going to put the gears aside and just get started.

Both of our passages today attempt to describe God.

One is the story of Isaiah and his call. Isaiah enters the temple and has a vision of God who is so big, that even with all of his imagination, all he can describe is the hem of God's robe filling the place. We hear about the angels: the seraphim and the cherubim flying, flames spouting, light engulfing. Isaiah can hear them singing perfect praise—*not unlike all of you a few moments ago as we joined them with our "Holy, Holy. Holys."*

You can almost feel Isaiah's anxiety in this place. If I were Isaiah, I would have hid behind a pillar and hoped that vision vanished like the smoke from the fires. That God was so big, so powerful, that God commanded hosts of angels who flew at his right hand. You can see why Isaiah didn't see himself as worthy, afraid to be the message bearer of that God.

Likewise, Paul in writing to the Romans, understood a similar fear. That moment of shrinking back instead of stepping forward, as he describes it: "¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption." Paul writing to the Romans acknowledges that that fear exists. That fundamental fear that pulls us back because we are uncertain as to our place: am I slave or am I an heir?

Where do I fit? Paul assures us that we are God's children, we are God's own. In the same way that seraphim sweeps down with a burning coal, saying "you are ready," God reaches out to us and invites us to be a part, to belong.

I've always wondered what would have happened had Isaiah hid, had Isaiah covered his lips. Imagine what we would have lost. Imagine if we never again sang about God declaring: *Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*? We needed Isaiah's imagination and prophetic voice to understand us about God. God needed Isaiah to speak, to teach, to help build the church to know God.

When we talk about God: infinite, mysterious, infallible, we are talking about a God who calls us children, who leans close enough to touch our lips. That is not a far off mystery. That is someone who is close.

Can we sit with that for a second: This is the God that Paul describes, a God who is right here with us:

The Spirit leads us.

Christ is our brother

God who calls us children.

We may get caught up in the details, but there is a beautiful truth about God we can proclaim today.

For all of the mystery, God cares about relationships. God is in the temple because God is searching for someone to speak to the people God loves. Someone to preach good news and a new path to a people who were about to be lost. God reached out first. The Spirit reaches out to us first to lead us, to make us children. God doesn't want to be some far off mystery, God wants to be known and wants to know us.

There's something familiar in this mystery. When you think about the people sitting next to you, the people that you love; there's as much mystery sitting next to you, as there is in God. As we come to know more and more about a person, we have to wrap our head around their story,

around their challenges, their joys, their foibles. They're a mystery too. When we approach God as mystery, it's like meeting a good friend, and trying to find out more about that friend, learning more about God as God chooses to sit next to us. we still experience mystery, but it is a mystery we want to learn more about. It took time to know them, it takes effort to understand them, there are parts of the people you love that you will never fully know. God is a mystery in the same way. When we love someone, we're willing to explore that mystery.

We shouldn't be surprised that God is relational with us, because as a good many theologians have argued, God is fundamentally relational. Jonathan Edwards, the same famous for his sermon about sinners in the hands of an angry God, that Jonathan Edwards spend much of his theological life considering the trinity. His argument centered on the nature of love. To love you must have something to love... an object of affection. You cannot sit in isolation and Love. Before time the trinity was: the father loving the son, loving the spirit, loving the father, loving the son, loving the spirit. Love comes from relationship. God from the very beginning existed in perfect relationship. An outflowing of that uncontainable love became the act of creation; that love became the word that spoke in Isaiah, that love took shape as Jesus Christ was poured out for us. That love between and within God is now extended to us that we are made a part of.

Paul and Isaiah are both testimonies to the fact that we risk something when we don't speak, by not trying to explore this mystery. We shrink back, from God who is reaching out, we miss something. God is sitting next to us, inviting us to know more, to try and to experiment, to find new ways to describe God. Not a far off mystery, incomprehensible, but a mystery like any other person we love, worthy of our time and attention.

Why do we talk about God? You're already doing it! How do we explore this mystery? How do we talk about God?

Take your pick.

While Augustine used theology, he also used his intellect and imagination.

Michelangelo used paint and stone.

Bach used music.

Johannes Kepler studied the movements of the planets.

For some of you it is in your voices raised in song.

For some of you it is heads bowed in prayer.

For some of you it is in your study.

For others it's in the steady service caring for neighbors near and far.

You're already doing theology, don't let the doctrine slow you down. This is our right as children of God, to get to know the one who created us, to help define the one who sustains us, to draw even closer to the spirit who abides with us.

I think there will always be parts of God we can't quite articulate, but as Charles Wesley so perfectly described, we wait for the day, when that last mystery falls away when *in heaven we take our place, till we cast our crowns before you, lost in wonder, love and praise!*²

Until that day, Children of God, search, and speak, and act, give new definitions and find new images, rediscover forgotten aspects, of this Triune God. Love the mystery, because the mystery loves you.

² Hymn 366, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling", 1747.