

May 30, 2021

The Holy Trinity

Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Milan, WI

St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Edgar, WI

Text: Isaiah 6:1-8

In the Name of the Father and the ☩ Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**“Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”** (v.5) Isaiah’s vision of God on His heavenly throne was both exhilarating and terrifying, which is the common response of one who encounters the Living God. It is not, as is portrayed in movies and TV shows, with sweet little visions of God as an old woman or little children as angels. God is not a doddering old man who hands out candy and pats people on the head. He is the great I AM, powerful and mighty. When you approach God, you tremble and quake and cannot help but throw yourself to the ground. You are in the presence of majesty and holiness, a holiness so pure and powerful that it can kill us. Isaiah was right to be afraid. He knew his own sinfulness and, even more, he knew he came from a sinful people, the kingdom of Judah. They had become very wealthy and prosperous, being a crossroads for trade across the ancient world, and in their success they had wandered from the God who made it all happen. They became gluttonous, seeking only their own wealth and pleasure, content to take a bribe in order to get ahead, willing to oppress the poor, the fatherless and the widow. They were very much like modern people in this way... or perhaps it is better to say that we are like the people of Judah 2,700 years ago. Greed never goes out of style.

But there was more to it than just their gluttony and hatred of their fellow man. They were an adulterous generation... and I’m not just talking about cheating on their spouses. They were also unfaithful to their God. They worshipped idols made with their own hands and imaginations, setting up false gods alongside YHWH, the same God who had saved them from slavery and brought them into the promised land. But that was so long ago... nearly 800 years before Isaiah’s time. They weren’t an old-fashioned people, they were cosmopolitan and progressive. They had goods from all around the world, why shouldn’t they worship gods from around the world, too?

That is what Isaiah was referring to when he said, **“I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.”** It’s not just that they were liars, although that was true. It’s not just that they perverted justice in order to get ahead, although that was also true. It is that they dared to call upon the name of the LORD while also calling upon the names of other gods. They were a people of unclean lips and their mouth spoke falsehood. God uses the language of marital unfaithfulness when describing the idolatry of His people. He is our husband and we, the Church, are His wife. You cannot claim to uphold the wedding vow while whispering sweet words into the ear of another. They were cheating on the God they said they would love above all else. All of this was on Isaiah’s mind as He stood in the vestibule of God’s heavenly temple, looking at this holy assembly gathered around God’s throne. He was thinking: I am so dead.

Even though Isaiah was unworthy to be in the presence of God, he was not destroyed. Our God is a generous god, giving blessings even when we do not deserve them, showering us with forgiveness and His love. That is what Isaiah received there: Forgiveness. One of the angels who attend God's throne came to him with a burning coal, taken from the altar of incense that stands before the throne, and he touched the burning coal to Isaiah's lips. Isaiah did not burst into flames, nor did he howl in pain. This was no ordinary act, but a sacramental act. God took a thing and tied to it His absolution. The seraph said to Isaiah, **"Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."** (v.7) This was not the first time that God did this. From our reading in John chapter 3, Jesus pointed to the bronze serpent incident in Numbers 21, when God sent poisonous snakes among the Hebrews for complaining about His manna, calling it "worthless food". As they were being collectively punished for their lack of faith, they were instructed to fashion a bronze serpent and hang it from a cross, that if they gazed upon it in faith, they might live. Jesus pointed to that as a precursor to His own salvific work. By His death upon the cross, our sins would be atoned for, our guilt taken away. The bronze serpent hanging from a cross was symbol that was more than a symbol. It was a physical act, bound up with God's promise and it did what He said it can do.

After he was absolved, Isaiah heard a wonderful Trinitarian proclamation from God. **"And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"** (v.8) Notice both the first person singular and the first person plural are used in that sentence. This is a hint of the Unity in the Trinity. It is not the only one found in Scripture, of course, there are many in the Old Testament as well as the New. But it is also reflected in the thrice-repeated call of the seraphim, **"Holy, holy, holy is YHWH of hosts"**. This was not a routine way for man to describe God. In fact, only in visions of heaven are we given such a declaration by the angel hosts themselves. In Revelation chapter 4, John is given a glimpse of the never-ending worship in heaven and he hears the angels crying, **"Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!"** (Rev. 4:8) It is this same confession that we make in the Creeds and in the Sanctus as we gather to worship God: He is three in one, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, each person holy, each person God. The same God who created heaven and earth, who chose Abram from among a pagan people, who chose the unwilling prophet Moses to save His people... this is the same God that we worship and adore. The God who came down from heaven and took up flesh for us, to atone for our sins on the cross and rose from the grave for us. The God of mercy and steadfast love, who forgave not only the fickle Hebrews in the desert, not only Isaiah and the adulterous kingdom of Judah, but who forgives us as well.

On this Trinity Sunday we stand amidst a new Judah, a people who are wealthy and content with all they have accumulated, who dabble with the occult and claim to be "spiritual" while ignoring the God of history. We Christians stand in the place of Isaiah and we boldly commit the most egregious crime possible in our modern world: We say that there is only one truth, not many, only one God, not many, and He reveals Himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

As you know, this is my last service with you. On Tuesday we leave for Fort Wayne and next Sunday you will have another pastor preaching from this pulpit. It is my prayer for you that you continue in the faith once delivered by the saints, that you boldly stand up in the face of an increasingly hostile world. That the name of the Triune God always be found on your lips, in bad times and in good. He is your light and salvation. He is your hope and joy.

In the name of the blessed Trinity, Amen.

Rev. Schopp