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The First Sunday after Pentecost: Trinity Sunday
27 May 2018
Isaiah 6:1-8
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Richmond, VA

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

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

We live in a rapidly changing world. Recent technological changes have fundamentally altered our way of being. Our world is saturated with information. Twenty-four hour news has become the norm, and many of us now have the ability to carry around at all times a tiny device that gives us access to the near infinite resources of the internet. It's no longer the case that you have to deal with the frustration of trying to recall a random fact in conversation. You need only pull out a phone to google the question or even better, ask Siri. Your answer will come in mere seconds.

Technology has made the world smaller, and on the surface it is easier to be connected with others than at any other time in history. I can use my iPhone to Facetime with a friend who lives on the other side of the world, and through social media I can maintain at least a surface level connection with hundreds of 'friends' in all parts of the world. One of the fundamental paradoxes of our time, however, is that despite our unprecedented abilities to be connected, people feel more isolated than ever. Technology can become as much a barrier as it is a connector. No doubt we have all witnessed the sad scene of a group of people all busy on their phones while ignoring the humans right in front of them. There is a sense in which something significant is lacking in many peoples' lives, and it seems no surprise that some of our most pressing societal issues and dis-eases, such as the opioid crisis and rising suicide levels, are related to this sense of isolation.

Amidst the rapidly changing conditions of our world, you have chosen to do something quite radical today. You have followed in what Christians have done for nearly two thousand years and you have gathered on Sunday for worship. On this day, Trinity Sunday, the Church celebrates the mystery of our one God in Trinity of Persons and Unity of Being. The Prayer Book describes it as one of the most important feasts of the entire year, placing it in the same category as Easter, Christmas, and Pentecost. I dare say the excitement we feel on Trinity Sunday rarely equals or even approaches the excitement we feel on Christmas or Easter. Unlike most feasts of the liturgical year which celebrate a particular event from the life of Christ or a particular saint, Trinity Sunday is centered on a doctrine, and let's face it, it's hard to get excited about doctrine. The Trinity is complex and mystifying. It took the early Church several centuries to fully articulate its understanding of the Trinity, and a great deal of humility is still required when speaking about this great mystery of our faith. It is far too easy to attempt to speak about the Trinity and instead wander into the heretical, or perhaps just as bad, it is all too easy to attempt to explain something that is ultimately beyond our full comprehension and ability to explain. Today, instead, I want to point us to the juxtaposition between transcendence and imminence that is at the heart of our triune God.

Today's reading from Isaiah describes one of the most amazing and memorable encounters contained in the Hebrew Bible. The prophet Isaiah proclaims that he saw the Lord sitting on a throne in splendor. Attending God on his throne were seraphs, celestial creatures with six wings, who fly around the throne of the Lord, covering their faces and their feet crying out, 'holy, holy, holy is the Lord, of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.' The magnificence of this scene is palpable. Even the celestial figures cannot look upon the fullness of the divine presence. They cover their faces and their feet and proclaim three times the holiness of God. In

the Hebrew Bible, holiness at its essence means being set apart or separate. At the heart of God's being is holiness; God is radically separate and different from all other things.

Isaiah recognizes this fact and the incredible privilege he has been given. His response is perhaps unsurprising given the magnitude of the situation. He immediately proclaims his frail humanity and sinfulness and acknowledges the incredible sight he is beholding: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips... yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!' Isaiah experiences the utter transcendence of God. It is a transcendence so beyond anything that the human mind can imagine that even the pivots on the thresholds of the temple shook at the sound of the seraphs' proclamation: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.'

Many of you will recognize this proclamation as the opening portion of the *Sanctus*, the song we sing each week in the Eucharistic Prayer. The word *Sanctus* is simply the Latin word for 'holy.' At an early point in the development of the Church's liturgy, this great song of praise from Isaiah was joined with the lines from Psalm 118 'blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord' (called the *Benedictus* from the Latin word for 'blessed') and together these two were inserted into the Eucharistic Prayer, the Church's great prayer of thanksgiving and praise offered over bread and wine. You may have noticed that some people will make a solemn bow when the *Sanctus* is sung. I've always found this ritual gesture to be particularly meaningful. In the face of the holiness of God, I find a deep bow of reverence and adoration to be a powerful reminder of God's glory. The use of the body and ritual actions as forms of worship is as old as the Bible itself. Matthew's gospel, for example, tells us that the magi, the wise men from the east, came searching for the Christ child, and when they found him they 'fell down and worshipped.' There is something within us as humans that at times demands that we bow in the face of the holy.

This depiction of God is, however, incomplete. This might be welcome news for those of you who know all too well the idea of God as distant and separate who judges and condemns from afar. This view of God has been harmful for far too many, and that fact must be acknowledged. The same God who is seated in splendor on his throne is the same God ‘who loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.’ It is the same God who became incarnate, took on human flesh, and lived as one of us. It is the same God who was poured out on the disciples on Pentecost and continues to guide the Church. It is the same God who is closer to us than our very breath.

Transcendence and imminence: in the juxtaposition between the two we begin to glimpse a bit of the mystery that is the triune God. We need both to make any sense of the Trinity. The dangers of focusing exclusively on the transcendence of God have already been noted. In our current world, however, the greater temptation seems to be to focus exclusively on the imminence of God. If we focus on God exclusively as one who is close and knowable, we risk making God in our own image. We can begin to domesticate and tame our understanding of God. Somehow God is always on our side. God always seems to agree with our way of doing things, our way of understanding politics, our way of understanding the world. We can begin to think that we fully understand God and the way God works in the world. The mystery and holiness are stripped away from God, and in the process we create an idol, a false image that does not reflect the reality of our Triune God. Any effort to control God is, of course, futile. We must hold both transcendence and imminence in that juxtaposition if we are to begin to catch a glimpse of the mystery of the Holy Trinity.

In our rapidly changing world, people are starving for mystery and transcendence. People are longing to be connected to something beyond themselves. People are hungry for God. This past year of seminary I served as an intern in a parish located very close to Yale's undergraduate campus. Every Sunday evening at 9:00 the parish offers a service of Compline, the monastic office of prayer just before sleep. The church is dark, lit only by a few candles, and is filled with the sweet smell of incense. A group of choristers sings the entire office from an unseen location in a balcony. It is a service of contemplation and mystery, and it is hugely popular. Each week just under 100 people come to this service of Compline, and the vast majority of those who attend are Yale undergraduates who have no other connection with religion. They come because they are craving mystery and transcendence. They come because they long for connection with something beyond themselves. They come seeking God. Now I'm not suggesting that the only way to encounter mystery and the holy is by burning some incense and listening to beautiful music. It is certainly one way to do that. We can encounter God just as powerfully in the small gathering of a community in a chapel or in the very space we occupy now.

Perhaps that's part of what brings you here every week. Here as a community we gather to hear the sacred story proclaimed again. We gather around the table, joining with the entire angelic chorus as we sing the heavenly song of 'Holy, holy, holy' and acknowledge the splendor, glory, and holiness of our God. Yet, we also gather around the table to receive the body and blood of Christ, to receive God's presence in a most intimate way. We acknowledge our sinfulness even as we are reminded of God's great love and desire to be in relationship with us. We come here each week to worship and adore our Triune God. This is the primary purpose of our gathering. To make worship centered around anything else is dangerous and misguided.

As this community continues to await the call of a priest-in-charge and feelings of excitement, impatience, and perhaps even anxiety inevitably accompany that wait, I pray we may find our center in worship and prayer. It is only through immersing ourselves into the life of the Triune God, the one in whom we live and move and have our being, that we will find strength for the journey. It was only after he beheld the glory of the Lord's presence that Isaiah was able to accept the Lord's call and say 'Here I am! Send me.' Trust in the love and provision of our God who both cannot be contained by the cosmos yet comes to meet us this day in bread and wine. Dwell in that mystery, and invite others who hunger for it to come and experience it. All shall be well indeed when we place our trust in our God, who is + Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.