

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church

Christians Confess Clear Yet Incomprehensible Truth

Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ²Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. ³And they were calling to one another:

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory."

⁴At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

⁵"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."

⁶Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

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!"

This week I came across the term Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, a belief system consisting of five points – 1.) there's a god who watches over human life, 2.) this god wants people to be good, nice and fair to each other, 3.) this god wants people to be happy and feel good about themselves, 4.) this god isn't directly involved in the lives of individuals, 5.) good people go to this god's heaven when they die. While we might be unfamiliar with the term, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is the prevalent religion of our day. Its theology dominates social media and casual conversation across America, especially here in the suburbs. In fact, there are no small number of people in this country who consider themselves Christian, but their beliefs are actually moralistic therapeutic deism. Some could be sitting here today.

How can this be? How can people baptized into the name of the Father and the of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ... who possess at least a passing understanding of the real meaning of Christmas and Easter ... go to church occasionally ... drift so far from Christianity even while thinking they embrace it?

The short answer is we have always been tempted to recast God in our own image. In a couple weeks when the sermon is on the Genesis 3 account of Adam and Eve falling into sin, we will see where this temptation originally came from. It remains tempting to this day because we tend to think of God more according to what seems good and right and important in our life and times. This invariably sets us adrift from who he really is. Eventually, if we're not careful, the god we end up following isn't much more than a construct of our own imaginations and impulses, no matter how socially conscious and altruistic they might be.

Against this tendency stands the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, an essential and foundational truth of Christianity. It is something so clearly taught in Scripture, that there's really no debate about it in the visible Christian church on earth – which ought to tell you something. The doctrine is straightforward: *the only true God is three persons, yet one being*. Not three gods, but one. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each 100% God. It is a truth we verbalize in our Creeds (the Athanasian Creed today). Yet at the same time, it is a truth beyond our ability to fully comprehend and understand.

Which has led some to mock, 'How can you believe in a God you can't even explain?' – a classic Islamic criticism of Christianity, by the way. But really, the question should be: 'How can anyone believe in a god they can completely understand?' For if we could fully figure him out and contain him in our minds, then that would make us greater than God. Or at the very least, it would indicate we believe in a god no bigger than us – a god we've cast in our own image.

So, to be a Christian means, among other things, that one confesses the incomprehensible truth of the Trinity. This confession keeps us anchored on the fact that God is nothing like us. He's everything we are not: "uncreated, infinite, eternal, almighty." It makes us acknowledge how all that we have is from him, and all that we have he does not need. And so, Christians come into the presence of this great and unfathomable God in ways no Moralistic Therapeutic Deist or Muslim or adherent of any other faith ever would. We come not to give but to receive; not to do but to rest; not to get answers and information from him but to worship him. For true worship of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit is to confess who we really are and to receive life from who he really is in his forgiveness of our sins.

The First Lesson about Isaiah's encounter with the triune God illustrates this perfectly. He comes into the presence of who God really is – "uncreated, infinite, eternal" and especially "almighty." And this makes clear who Isaiah really is. "I'm a dead man!" (6:3) he essentially cries. I'm a dirty rotten sinner in the presence of the "holy, holy, holy ... Lord Almighty" (6:5). I'm gasoline in the presence of fire.

Yet something unexpected happens. There's no combustion! Isaiah doesn't die. For along with all the blazing holiness of God, there is an altar for sacrifice. And when one of the seraphim came at him with a burning coal from that altar, it wasn't to kill him but to cleanse him. "With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for" (6:7). And just like that fear and dread are gone, replaced with faith and hope and life. So much so that when Isaiah then heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" – us: Father, Son and Holy Spirit – Isaiah isn't drifting off somewhere, doing his own thing his own way. He's right where he's supposed to be. Right where the true God wants him. "Here am I" – the one you didn't kill but cleansed, the one you made alive - "Send me!" (6:7).

Today's Holy Gospel similarly had Jesus offering to anchor a drifting Nicodemus in the truth. But, like some of us, Nicodemus wants to figure everything out. He expects to wrap his mind around God and the things of God. But he can't. Jesus is telling him incomprehensible truths. About the unfathomable God and the wonderful yet incomprehensible things he is doing; about being "born again" (Jn 3:3) and being "born of the Spirit" (Jn 3:8). Nicodemus wants to be in the classroom, but that night Jesus wanted him in church, receiving not all the answers from him but eternal life itself by believing in him.

Nicodemus doesn't get that he needed to be like Isaiah ... at least, not at first. For it seems like he did later, being one of the two men who cared for Jesus after he died, taking his body down and laying it in the tomb. Maybe it was that was the very day Nicodemus stopped drifting, when the sacrifice from the altar touched him and cleansed him and gave him life.

So, whether it is Isaiah and Nicodemus or you and me, what keeps us anchored in the truth is confessing that God is incomprehensible and yet has done wonderful things, clearly articulated in the Gospel and simply believed in the heart where the Holy Spirit has work faith. Christians don't confess to have all the answers. We confess to have the truth. That "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16).

With this gift of life God now sends you. Where might also be incomprehensible! It might not be where you've planned ... it might not be where you want to go. But it isn't pointless and random. It's on purpose. He wants you there for his good reasons and is there with you: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit always giving you what you need.

This is the God we worship – the only true God – three persons, one being who forgiveness sin and gives life. This is the clear yet incomprehensible truth Christians confess.

Amen.

Prayer of the Day

M: Almighty and everlasting God, you have graciously called us to the confession of the true faith, acknowledging the glory of the eternal Trinity and worshiping the majesty of your one being. Keep us steadfast in this faith and worship and bring us at last to see you in your eternal glory, living and reigning as one God, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, now and forever.

C: **Amen.**

Prayers of the Church

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Special requests

- Receive our thanks, O Lord, as we mark the birthday for our sister **Faith Markham**. We praise you for how she has journeyed faithfully through the stages of her life with a dependence on you her Savior . We pray that you will continue to grant vigor, strength and health. Bless her days with beautiful memories, much love and few worries, as you are her Rock and Salvation.
- Lord God, in whom there is life and light: this **Memorial Day Weekend** as we remember those who died in defense of our country, accept our thanks for them and our prayers for all those who mourn them. Stir within us thanksgiving for what we've inherited as citizens of this nation. Make us vigilant for the freedoms of all and willing to sacrifice for the common good of our fellowship citizens.

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John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

³ Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

⁴ “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

⁹ “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

¹⁰ “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? ¹¹ Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,^u ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

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