

May 27, 2018

Title: Here Am I

Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-8

John 3:1-17

A basic Christian belief is that God is one being but exists in three persons – God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Trinity is almost impossible to adequately explain and especially in one sermon. This week I read that “Trinity Sunday is the source of innumerable indecipherable sermons. It is not exactly on the list of parishioners’ favorites.” The observation was made that the “Preacher opens a Trinity Sunday sermon by apologizing for his (or her) ignorance of the subject before spending the next 20 minutes demonstrating that ignorance.”ⁱ

So, I’m going to attempt to not do that. The most profound statement I ever remember about the Trinity was these words, “It is absurd to apologize for mystery.” Apparently, those were either the most profound words of the chapter or the ones that resonated with me the most because they are the only ones I remember.

We attempt to explain the Trinity in various ways and while they may be helpful to some extent, they all fall short of really hitting the mark. Some point to water, which we can find as a liquid water, steam or ice and use that to explain the three persons of the Trinity. Sometimes we use images like, describing myself as a Pastor, A grandmother, and a friend. Three very different ways that people know me and experience me, but they are all part of me. However, one big limitation of this is that while they may describe my role or the way I function with different people, there is no one who experiences me in all of those ways.

We do, however, experience God in three different ways, three different persons, Father, Creator, Heavenly Parent, as well as Jesus, the son, savior, and also the Holy Spirit.

Bottom line – at least as far as I am concerned, is that it is impossible to describe or really explain the Trinity, and yet, we know and experience the Trinity. “The Trinity is nothing more or less than God. The Trinity is in us, under us, working in us and through us to make us daughters and sons of God.”ⁱⁱ The reality is that any words we try to use fall short of fully describing God, so I would invite us instead to embrace the mystery.

There are many mysteries for us in our faith and today’s scriptures are good examples of that. The mystery and great celebration – is that we over and over again, we see that God needs us. God chooses us. God loves us. Why? I don’t know; I can’t really explain it, but like the Trinity, I know it is true. It is another of those great, amazing, wonderful mysteries of life and of our faith.

We see this mystery in today’s scriptures. Isaiah was a prophet who lived in Jerusalem about 700 years before Jesus was born. He was likely related to the royal family and had ready access of Kings Ahaz and Hezekiah. Today, we heard his account of how he became a prophet, commissioned and sent out by God.

A human king – King Uzziah –died, probably around 740 BC. In that year, Isaiah had an amazing experience of the presence of God. He was terrified by it. He believed as most did in his culture that anyone who saw God would die. He believed that he definitely would not be the exception because he was sure he was unworthy to see God, and this was equally true of the people of his time.

But in the mystery of God, God simply met his needs. The vision tells us about a coal being taken from the fire and his lips being touched with it, with the assurance that his guilt was gone, and his sin was blotted out. At this point, God could easily have said, “Isaiah, I have something for you to do. I have spared your life so now you will go and do what I tell you.” I suspect that at this Isaiah, would have responded, “Yes, sir.”

But God didn't do that. God never coerces. God doesn't force. Instead God asked, “Who will be my messenger? Whom shall I send?” And then God was willing to wait for a response. God did not make it a transaction – I did something for you and now you will do what I want. No, God is all about free will – all about giving humans a chance to respond. So, God simply asks, “Whom shall I send and who will go for us?” and Isaiah responds, “Here am I; send me!”

It is never a transaction with God. It is always about love and grace. It is about God loving us so much, God answering our needs, God inviting us, but then the response is always up to us.

All of this took place during a time of great international insecurity, not very different from our current time. Isaiah was an educated man, he enjoyed ready access to the king. He was a man of privilege, but he insisted that the elite had deep ethical responsibility for those they governed. Isaiah, empowered by his encounter with God, empowered by his response to God's question, “Who will be my messenger?” frequently talked about both “justice” and “righteousness.” Isaiah believed and argued strongly that “being God's people involved not only worship of Jerusalem's God, but also behavior consistent with God's plans. God's care extended especially to the people without wealth, who stood outside

the halls of power. Isaiah was appalled by those who used the legal system to enrich themselves and cheat the needy.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Isaiah was a man who used his privilege, his access to the king, his education, his power, to call to accountability those who had privilege, wealth, and power. Isaiah warned the king, the nation, and the people, of upcoming destruction if they continued to ignore God’s demands that they live with justice and righteousness.

Nicodemus, living more than 750 years later, was also a man of privilege. He was a Pharisee, a religious scholar, a member of the Sanhedrin – the highest governing body of the Jewish people. He was a man with an impressive set of institutional credentials. Nicodemus apparently also cared a great deal about his credentials and his public reputation.

He came to Jesus at night probably to ask Jesus some questions, but while he was beating around the bush, Jesus cut through the false praise and went right to the heart of the situation. “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” This set off a discussion about what it meant to be “born from above” or “born again”. – Another mystery? At least it was to Nicodemus, who quite logically asked how it could be possible to be physically born again.

One of the problems with this passage is that it can be so familiar that being “born again” has in some circles become a slogan or a badge of honor. As I shared last week, the group that I was involved with while in College placed high emphasis on speaking in tongues, that they saw as the sign of being born again and being a true Christian. Because I hadn’t had a profound sudden experience like this, I thought it meant that I was somehow less than – not a real Christian.

As with the Trinity, we might well benefit from not trying to explain or get caught up in the ways some insist we must experience our faith, but rather accept the invitation to have our eyes opened all over again, to be surprised at what the Holy Spirit can and will do in our lives if and when we are willing to take the risk of new birth – of being open to new ways of understanding, of being astonished at the many ways the Spirit comes into our lives, the many ways the Spirit works in our lives; the many ways the Spirit shows up in new and disturbing places, whenever faith and new life appear.

Our churches include people like Nicodemus – people who have always tried to keep the rules, tried to do everything right, but still know that something is missing. Our churches include people like Isaiah, people who try to do the right thing, but think that they are not worthy to really see God – who think that God must be off at a distance.

If everyone in the world read the Bible, joined a church, and said hello to their neighbors; if we were all as good as Nicodemus; if we all tried to be as good as Isaiah, there would still be something missing. Our churches are filled with people like us, good people, people trying to live the best way we know how, but who may still have trouble believing that God really does want to meet our deepest needs like with Isaiah. We may have trouble believing that we can see the world in a different way when we really allow the Holy Spirit to live within us. We may not believe that God is really calling us, inviting us to be messengers, sending us to be the hands and feet of Christ in this world because surely that call is for someone else, someone better, someone younger, someone older, someone wiser, someone more trusting, someone who is different than us.

The One who created us also makes us worthy. The One who created us removes all the impediments that we think might separate us from God. The one who loves us still asks, “Whom shall I send?” and gives us the freedom to participate in God’s plan – or not.

When we said, “yes” to God, we began a life long journey that is part of the great mystery of faith. As we travel that journey, as we grow in our faith, we start to not only see things from God’s perspective, but we also begin to accept and make God’s perspective our own. With Isaiah, we begin to realize that those of us who have great privilege in our lives, also have great responsibility for the people God loves including those who do not have the earthly privileges that many of us have.

I have the great opportunity to interact with people in many different situations. I have learned that the external circumstances of life often don’t really control the way we see our lives. Two people with similar life situations may see and live their lives very differently. One may see life as dull and boring and may live life mostly out of a sense of duty. The Holy Spirit may be calling him or her to a better way, but he or she may not be able to see it. Another may see life as a gift, and the obstacles of life as bumps in the road, may recognize God holding their hand, comforting, may see friends as a gift from God, and may live life out of gratitude even when things are not the way they might have planned.

When we feel burned out; when we feel no joy in life, we should ask God, once again, to help us to be open to the working of the Holy Spirit in our life. When given to God, the dullest day can be a day with meaning. The emptiest week has purpose when it is committed to expressing, sharing, showing love. Life, when it seems to be at its most hopeless, when given in faith to God finds hope.

Each day in many different ways, God is asking “Whom shall I send?” and waiting for our response. God will never force us. God will never guilt us. God will only love us and continue to invite us, empower us, and wait for our response. Each day we are faced with the decision, when God asks, “Who shall I send?” will we respond, “Here am I, send me?”

ⁱ Byassee, Jason “My Name’s Trinity” in Preaching the Word, Sojourners, Trinity Sunday

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ The CEB Study Bible, Introduction to the Book of Isaiah.