

Isaiah 6:1-8      The Splendor of God's Holiness  
Psalm 29  
May 30, 2021

A year before I moved here, in 2014, the San Antonio Spurs won their 5th NBA championship, some of you may remember, Some of you may not care. They beat the Miami Heat, a team that back then had LeBron James and Dwayne Wade, and were the defending champions.

During the series the Spurs rose to a level of excellence rarely achieved even by the best teams, so that they were able to handily beat the better team. I remember a scene near the end of one of the games, in which James and his teammates were seen applauding the excellence, resigned to the reality that they whose job it was to prevent it, could do nothing to stave off defeat. They were the best team and had given their best effort, and could not prevail. So they acknowledged the excellence of their opponent.

Today we talk about the failure of language to convey the things of God. It is Trinity Sunday, and the idea of the Trinity is among the confounding attempts to put a word to divine things. It involves a logical contradiction of the first order, and can be confusing for some, while others may give up the effort altogether.

But let us *not* do that, because spending time considering Transcendent things, and Holy things, is an important part of not only being a Christian, but of

being human. The Trinity is for us like the bush on fire yet not consumed was for Moses, in the sense that it defies sensibility. It is Holy Ground. We are attracted to it, feel the need to say something about it.

Most of the time when the text from Isaiah 6 is read, the emphasis is on verse eight, "Here am I, send me," which is all by itself an inspiring sermon. But that emphasis can be a way of putting the cart before the horse.

So let me suggest, if I may, that we focus our attention today on the reaction of the prophet to the vision, "of the Lord seated on a throne, high and lifted up," with the six-winged seraphs singing the great hymn, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, the whole earth is full of his glory."

We learn that at the sound of their singing, the foundations shook, and the Temple was filled with smoke. And the reaction was a humble one; "Woe is me,' I cried, 'for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.'"

It may not require a vision of the heavenly court to stop us in our tracks like that. It could be one of nature's grand vistas, or the birth of a child, or a redemption, a mercy lived out, or even something silly that causes uncontrollable laughter until the tears come; it could be the sound of beautiful music or the witnessing of excellence.

But surely for each of us there is something that has confronted us with the grandness of life, and forces us to reckon with our smallness before it. Let us not pass up these moments, but like Isaiah, stand before them, even if it leads us to cry out, “woe is me.” Perhaps even in church we might be drawn in this direction, even when reflecting on the Trinity.

The unity of God’s multifaceted nature. One in three. Three in one; Father, Son, and Spirit. Almost anything one says will need to be clarified. It is either Tri-theism, making three gods where there is only one, or modalism, relinquishing God’s triune nature by emphasizing God’s activities; Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. As much or more than any other Christian doctrine, this one drives us to too many words, and the words can’t carry the freight.

In Acts 17, Paul is in Athens where he makes a speech at the Areopagus. A man named Dionysius, who was a member of that institution, became a believer. About 500 years later, a Christian leader writing under the same name, “Dionysius the Areopagite,” offered an interesting solution to this dilemma.

He constructed a spiritual exercise in which a participant went through a three-step process; make all the affirmations one can make about God, then deny them for their inadequacy. Make all the denials one can make (God is not . . .), then deny the denials for their inadequacy. Then be silent in the realization that none of the words are enough, leading to a humble admiration of the incomprehensibility of God.

For the next several hundred years this exercise was very popular and was used not only among the clergy but the laity as well. Instead of viewing the Trinity as a conundrum to be accepted by faith, which in part it is, or an intellectual problem to be solved, which in part it is, rather as a spiritual exercise designed to draw one into a deeper appreciation for the majesty of God, to create praise, to remind one that God can’t be figured out, and will always be “other” to us. We are forced to surrender.

One way to view the Trinity and Incarnation and the Atonement and other doctrines, is to contend with them until they bring us to our knees at the magnificence of God before whom we stand. And in our silence we know that not only is God beyond us and our ability to understand, but also preciously close to us:

Maker of the universe  
Forgiver of sins  
Comforter and guide throughout life.

Before such greatness, we are nourished; wounds are healed; when we look around we no longer see adversaries but friends, when we look ahead we no longer see the end of things, but new beginnings; and when we face burdensome demands we are no longer crowded in by despair but cradled in hope. All we can do is applaud the splendor of God’s Holiness, and then live . . .