

Today We Meet the Holy Trinity
Sermon on Isaiah 6:1-8
Saint Mark's, Watertown, WI
Pastor Karl Walther
May 18, 2008

Introduction: What Is God Like? – Today We Meet the Holy Trinity!

The Scriptures say: *Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God—the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.* Amen.

Dear fellow Christians—who worship the true and Triune God, the Holy Trinity: “What is God like?” “What would it be like to meet God, face to face?”

Those are questions that have occupied the minds of people for thousands of years. And they’re good questions! because there is a God; only a fool could deny that Somebody greater than ourselves has put all things together. And we are going to meet that God someday.

So: “What is God like?” “What would it be like to meet God, face to face?”

I think, in general, Americans have an answer to those questions. “God – hmm – God is bigger than we are, and not usually visible. He made things. Other than that, God is a lot like we are. He’s good-natured. He likes us, whether we behave or misbehave. He’s very tolerant. Importantly, he’s got a sense of humor. Even though he likes all people, he does have his favorites: the United States of America, and certain sports teams. And we’ll get to meet God someday, forever and ever, and so will everybody else. Oh, and it will be party, party, party....”

In today’s Word from God to us, the Prophet Isaiah meets the true and Triune God. Let’s see if his experience matches the average American’s perception of God....

Part One: We Deserve Destruction from God for Our Uncleanness

God’s Word to us today is Isaiah chapter six, verses one through eight. It begins: **In the year that King Uzziah died....** This would have been seven hundred forty BC—about twenty-seven and a half centuries ago. And of course, the setting is Israel—actually, Judah in the southern part of the Holy Land, and specifically, the capital city of Jerusalem.

Then and there, Isaiah reports: **I saw the Lord.** And so, by listening to Isaiah’s experience, we are no longer taking a poll of our people on the attributes of God, but rather we are hearing and seeing what the true and Triune God is really like.

So, what is the Lord like? Isaiah reports: He was **seated on a throne** – there’s one throne, and God is the only sovereign King of all. And the throne is **high and exalted** – with God, of course, higher and more exalted than the throne itself. **And the train of his robe filled the temple.**

So, the one place on earth that God is specially present is not in the mountains, or in the breeze among the trees, or on the lake, or in the chirping songs of the birds – as beautiful as all of those are – but rather in his temple, as it says here. Back at that time, the place God met his people by way of his Word was in Jerusalem. Nowadays, the “temple” in which God meets his people is wherever they get together, hear his Word, and celebrate his sacraments.

Interestingly, that’s all we hear of God directly for now. Instead, Isaiah goes on to describe the Lord’s surroundings—and their reaction to his presence. **Above [God]**

were seraphs. Seraphs or seraphim are literally “burning ones”. In Scripture, the term is used only here. It doesn’t denote a special kind of angel. Instead, it reminds us that each angel is flaming with the holiness of God. And if the angels are that flaming-holy, think of how exceedingly holy God himself must be!

As for these seraphs, then, each [had] six wings—or even six pairs of wings. You almost can’t imagine it! And these are merely the creatures of God.... With two wings they covered their faces—as if these holy ones could still not bear to gaze upon superlative holiness of God. With two [wings] they covered their feet—as if these holy ones dare not tread the same ground as the Most Holy God. And with two [wings] they were flying—because, of course, angels are speedy to do God’s will and to benefit us.

And [the seraphs] were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy – thrice holy! – is the LORD Almighty" – a Holy Father, whose paternal love is beyond our imagination! a Holy Son, whose sacrificial love is beyond our comprehension! and a Holy Spirit, whose indwelling love surpasses all our contemplation! "The whole earth is full of his glory." God’s glory: the sum total of his attributes, chief of which is his inestimable mercy—this glory of God fills the entire world!

And: At the sound of their voices – mind you, this is not even God’s voice, just the voices of his seraphs! – At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook. It must have been more than what we experience when our hands are over our ears, and a supersonic jet takes off a hundred yards in front of us, and every molecule of our very core is shaken! And the temple was filled with smoke. What a spectacle!

It’s a little different than meeting the good-natured, likeable, tolerant, jolly little old God that Americans have dreamed up for themselves. I mean: How would you respond to meeting a God like this? Well, we’d react like Isaiah: "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."

You and I would think of all the times we’ve tolerantly listened to blasphemies against our God. We’d think of all the times we’ve failed to speak up and defend him. We’d think of all the times we’ve giggled good-heartedly at jokes which aren’t in keeping with God’s good Word. We’d think of all those times we ourselves failed to praise God for his good gifts. We’d think of all those prayers that failed to cross our lips. We’d think of all the foul language we’ve spoken, if only in our minds. And we’d wonder: “How in the world will I not disintegrate in the blistering presence of God’s holiness?”

Part Two: Christ’s Sacrifice Purchased Forgiveness for Our Shortfall

But Isaiah survived. And so will we. How can that be? Well, Isaiah reports: Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. Ah, the altar, that bronze altar at the temple, which would fill in its entirety a large two-story classroom: thirty feet long – can you imagine?! – by thirty feet wide, by fifteen feet high – yeah: it required a set of stairs for the priests to get up to that altar! There on that altar, morning and evening and every time in between, tens of millions of animals had already been sacrificed.

Each time, the gathered worshippers said to themselves, “I deserve that pain. I deserve that death. I deserve that destruction. My sin earned it. It’s earned it well. But God has permitted me to sacrifice a substitute. Just as he slaughtered animals to clothe the sinful nakedness of my ancestors, Adam and Eve, just as he will slaughter a sacrificial Substitute, once and for all, for me in the future, ...this animal’s blood and death and destruction substitutes for mine.”

And Isaiah reports: *With [the live coal, taken from that altar, the seraph] touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away."* Literally: *Your crookedness, your perversion, is permanently turned away.* Your sin was coming to accuse you, but the Lord turned it back. *"And your sin atoned for."* Literally: *Your shortfall is continually removed by the payment of a ransom.* Your sin had enslaved you, but the payment has been made to set you free.

So, how are you and I ever going to survive a meeting with the true and Triune God: that King, high and exalted, from whose holiness even the holy angels seem to feel a need to shield themselves?! "See, Christ's body has touched your lips. Christ's blood was shed for you. The pain, the death, the destruction you deserved—he suffered it, and it's gone." When your wicked words were coming back to accuse you – no! – Jesus turned them back and said, "You're gone forever!" When your toleration of wickedness had enslaved you – no! – Jesus made the payment and said, "I've set you free!" That's the way you tolerate your meeting with the Holy Trinity.

Part Three: We Eagerly Volunteer to Serve the Lord

So, now's the point at which we get to go on living the way we always did: with full approval by our good-natured, likeable, tolerant, jolly little old God.... No! He has loved us and has paid the price to forgive our sin: in order to deliver us into a much more noble task than that!

Isaiah experienced it. He reports: *Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send?"* "I've got a mission for somebody. Now that I've accomplished the necessary sacrifice to take away the sins of the world, somebody has got to make it known." *"And who will go for us?"* This is the Trinitarian part of the text. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are taking counsel together. They're asking, "Who will make known to the world God's mercy?"

And [Isaiah] – formerly terrified, now purified; formerly unclean, now seen as holy – Isaiah said [to God], "Here am I. Send me!"

That's exactly our attitude, right? Our Holy Father, his Holy Son, the Holy Spirit has scrubbed us clean. No message is more important. No washing is more vital, also for others. No goal could be greater for our entire lives than to share this message with others. So: "Here am I. Send me!" we cry.

For Isaiah that meant proclaiming salvation in Christ – and he did it ever so sweetly! – so that most of his people would become firm in their rejection of the true and Triune Lord. In the next words, God says to Isaiah: *"Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes."* In fact, for Isaiah that meant – if we are to believe Jewish history from outside of the Bible – that he was sawed in two for his testimony.

"Here am I. Send me!" For you and me that means proclaiming salvation in Christ also—come what may. It means inviting to hear the gospel, one more time: your spouse, your parents, your children, your grandchildren, that dear friend of yours, your coworker, your neighbor—even though they might get mad at you. It means rejoicing out loud in your own forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ, and extending that to others—even though nothing seems to change in their souls. It means sacrificing our savings, our vacations, our snazzy vehicles, our fancy restaurant meals, or our nice furnishings, so that somebody else across the community or the world or across the generations can get to know the true and Triune God, as we have done. (And hey, it all beats getting sawed in two, doesn't it?!)

Conclusion: The Holy Trinity Is What God Is Like!

So, on the Festival of Holy Trinity we ask, “What is God like? What would it be like to meet God, face to face?” Is he the jolly and tolerant God that Americans have dreamed up for themselves? Hardly! He’s holy, in the extreme! Is he good-natured? Well, I guess, but he’s so much more! God is perfect love. The Holy Trinity is such perfect mercy that his own sacrifice – in Christ Jesus – purchased our sins’ forgiveness and our eternal righteousness.

All things considered, I’d far rather trust and serve that true and Triune God than any other god I could possibly dream up, wouldn’t you...?! Amen.

The Scriptures urge us: *These words I have spoken to you today are to be upon your hearts. Teach them to your children.* Amen.