

Sermon – “Seeing and Understanding”
Sunday, May 27, 2018
Scripture Readings: Isaiah 6:1-8 and John 3:1-17
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Our first reading comes from a vision of the prophet Isaiah, in which the prophet is called to the task of going for God to the people. Listen now to these words from Isaiah 6, verses 1 through 8.

¹In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ²Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³And one called to another and said:

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

⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” 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!”

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Listen now for the Word of God in this reading from the Gospel According to John, chapter 3, verses 1 through 17.

¹Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”

³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

⁴Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” ¹¹“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

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This weekend we celebrate Trinity Sunday. This is the occasion on which the church traditionally remembers the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, celebrating the three persons of the one God. That means we could probably also legitimately call it confusion Sunday, because there is almost no doctrine within orthodox Christian theology harder to penetrate than the notion of the Trinity.

The idea of the Trinity was developed by early Christians as they sought to understand the things that had been revealed to them about the nature of God in the ancient Scriptures while now looking at them in the light of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ and the church’s experience of the Holy Spirit.

Here is the gist of what the church came up with: The basic Trinitarian idea is that God consists of three “persons” (for lack of a better term), all of one substance or essence and together constituting one God. That is, you might say there is one “what,” made up of three “who”s, named by Scripture as “Father,” “Son,” and “Holy Spirit.” All three *distinct* from each other, but not *separate* from each other. There is oneness in the three, and not just oneness of purpose, or oneness of community, but oneness of actual being. They are often defined simply by their three different places in the Godhead relationship: the Father “generates,” the Son “is begotten” of the Father, and the Spirit “proceeds from” the other two.¹ We understand them to have distinct roles: For instance, the Son is the one who became human in the person of Jesus, and the Spirit we heard about last week, giving power to the church on Pentecost. Yet each is seen as a full participant in all the work of the others, and despite language of proceeding and begetting, which sounds like it places one before another, they are all coeternal and coequal.

¹ Or, according to the Eastern Orthodox tradition, proceeds from the Father only. The 4th Century language of the Nicene Creed stated, “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.” At some point during the next 700 years, some parts of the church began using a version which said, “...proceeds from the Father and the Son, ...” and whether or not to accept this change as valid was a major source of disagreement contributing to the 11th Century split between the Western (Roman) and Eastern (Orthodox) churches. This is known as the *Filioque* controversy, after the Latin word which was inserted.

Simple, right? It turns out that trying to conceive of God being all of these things is, let us say, not easy, and the early church found it had to spend a lot of time arguing within itself about how to describe the idea in a way which maintained all the things that were believed to be true and important without either going astray into things they did not believe to be true or falling into language which seemed nonsense. There came to be a long list of traditional heresies that concern the Trinity, as the church considered assorted descriptions of the concept and determined many to be inadequate or promote a false notion in some way. Most of these same mistakes continue to pop up in modern attempts to explain Trinitarianism, most of which seem to take the form of simile or metaphor. You've probably heard some of them.

Is the Trinity like a shamrock, which has three leaves yet is one plant? This begins to give us a useful image of how something can be three yet one, but if we carry it too far, it falls down, by leading us to imagine God can be divided into different "parts".

Is the Trinity like an egg, comprising yolk, white, and shell? This one runs into even more trouble, because these are not only separable parts, but also fail to be all of one substance.

Is the Trinity like water, one compound which can appear in three ways, as solid, liquid, or gas? Like the others, this is helpful for seeing a piece of the puzzle, but like the others, it is just a starting point. If we let it be the whole picture for us, we make the mistake they call Modalism, where you are really not talking about three distinct entities at all, just a single one which changes from one thing to another at different times.

Perhaps it is like a human being, who could be seen three ways; for instance, as father to one person, son to another, and husband to a third? Alas, this falls into the same trap of eliminating true three-ness.

Other descriptions of the Trinity work out to have one of the persons of God superior to another, have one coming before another in time, reduce one to a piece of another, or reduce one or more of them to being something less than fully God.

Every single analogy we come up with seems helpful at first glance, yet breaks down when we compare it to the full idea the church has for about two millennia been trying to convey: One God, in three distinct but inseparable persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, consubstantial, coequal, coeternal.

So...how can we understand this?

Perhaps we cannot.

Who says everything that is true is possible to for the human mind to comprehend? Why would we expect it to be true that the human brain could fully grasp everything that is so in the universe or beyond it? This is why the church has, since ancient times, seen the Trinity ultimately as a holy mystery. It is the theological version of quantum theory: something believed to be true, with evidence to back it up, with people able to *describe* it, but not really able to *understand* it.

Mystery should not surprise us too much when it comes to God, given that God transcends the entire universe. We see mystery in both scripture passages for today. Isaiah speaks of a direct audience with God in a vision, and it is a baffling, unexplained experience, full of metaphor described in visual terms. The Lord visible, a throne, a kingly robe with its hem filling the temple, the place shaking and filling with smoke, and guilt described in terms of “unclean lips”.²

Jesus, speaking to Nicodemus in the passage from John, says things which confuse not only Nicodemus but us, too, speaking of being born from above, of water and Spirit.³ These are, simply put, confusing things.

Now, it is my job to stand up here and talk about confusing things. And to get this job I had to spend a lot of time studying those things. I have a graduate degree from Princeton Theological Seminary, which is regarded as a top-tier academic and religious institution. They call the degree I’ve earned, in fact, a Master of Divinity, which suggests something rather impressive. I have had the fortune of getting an education from some of the most expert minds around who have spent their careers studying and educating teachers and ministers about scripture and theology. I am thus going to claim some educated authority here when I make the following assertion: there is exactly one ministerial characteristic that truly gets enhanced in anyone who is really paying attention to a theological education, and it is not, I’m sad to say, comprehension of all mystery; it is humility.

You see, studying the Bible thoroughly may provide facts to draw upon, knowledge to speak from, and a fuller awareness of things which are indeed important. But almost every answer we find provokes further curiosity and questions. Almost everything we thought was simple turns out to be deeper than expected. The more time we spend in the Bible, the more our human confidence and certainty gets set back on its heels. It is not that theological study makes a person less assured in his or her faith in God; but rather that it makes us less assured in our faith in our own self-constructed mental models of God. It makes a person more cautious. It makes us take more care with our words. This is why the early church leaders worked so hard at constructing some of the most basic statements of belief and doctrine, including those about the Trinity, to make sure they said the things they had reason to believe were true, but went no further than this, and rebuked those whose claims went too far into specifics that were unknowable, or created mental images that were too concrete and could lead us astray.

And it is also why preaching is an intimidating task. When I walked into this church for the first time, and I saw that elevated, formal pulpit in the sanctuary, it really struck home for me: people will expect me to stand up in front of them and preach words to which they will give authoritative weight in matters concerning the eternal life of their souls. I am not given this

² See Isaiah 6:1-8.

³ See John 3:1-17. Also worth noting is that the *New Revised Standard Version* translates Jesus’s words to Nicodemus as “born from above,” whereas various other translations render this “born again.” (The Greek word can be interpreted either way, and either seems to work in context and with Nicodemus’s response.) This passage is therefore also the source of the concept of “born-again Christians.” Unfortunately, neither “born from above” nor “born again” makes this teaching of Jesus anything less than hard to understand, for Nicodemus or for the modern reader.

space merely to say interesting things about religion and culture, I'm expected to speak actual truth about God. I am entrusted with the task of conveying sound doctrine, correcting error, knowing that what I teach people and where I lead people matters. That's a tall order.

The weight of that task, combined with the discovery that much of the mystery of faith, when examined and studied, becomes only more mysterious, has led me sometimes to ask the question: what standing do I have, another often-perplexed follower of Jesus Christ, to preach the Gospel to you all? My theological education, far from making me sure of all the answers, has made me more sure I do not have all the answers. My robe and stole, when put on, do not suddenly bestow upon me comprehension of all things. Who am I to presume to speak with authority of the nature of God?

I have thought about this a lot over the years since I began to pursue this vocation, and I have come to the conclusion that at bottom there is really only one thing that gives me the right to speak of such things. Is it having complete understanding? No. Is it having a seminary degree? No.

My true standing to preach the Gospel to you comes from just one thing: being a fellow sinner who has met Jesus Christ and learned of grace. And if you have, too, then you, too, are one with standing and call to share the grace that you have received.

It is hard to believe that *any* of us are up to the task. But we are not alone in this problem. Peter and the other apostles failed to comprehend a whole lot of what Jesus told them.⁴ Isaiah woefully called himself a man of unclean lips.⁵ But Jesus said to Peter, "Feed my sheep."⁶ And those unclean lips of Isaiah were touched by the burning coal of God's powerful, healing grace, and he was sent out to speak to the world.⁷

It is there, in our own experience of the majestic, curative grace of God, that we find not only our standing to preach, but our ability to preach, which comes not from perfect intellectual comprehension but from personal experience of the Lord as one in whom we can trust and put our hope. And that is also why the truest, most persuasive preaching is not found in articulate words alone, but in a well-articulated life which is itself trustworthy and which demonstrates trust and lives out faith in God.

We demonstrate what we truly trust by what we cling to and find our security in. Is it our things that make us feel safe? Is it our money that makes us feel secure? What do we fear to part with? That is what our hopes are resting on. And that, whatever it may be, is the hope to which we testify with the lives that we live.

⁴ Many of the parables, teachings, and deeds of Jesus were surprising and perplexing to his closest followers. Among other examples, see, for instance, the collection of parables told in Luke 18, leading up to Jesus directly speaking to them of his death and resurrection, at which point "they understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said" (*NRSV*). Or the last supper, as told in John 13, where not only does Peter fail to comprehend Jesus's meaning in washing their feet ("You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand," Jesus says), but the disciples also misunderstand the final interaction between Jesus and Judas before the latter departs to betray Jesus. Luke 24 shows us that their confusion in interpreting any of the things they had seen and experienced persisted even beyond the resurrection.

⁵ See Isaiah 6:5.

⁶ See John 21:15-19.

⁷ See Isaiah 6:6 through the end of the chapter.

The ability to let go of the things of the world, to readily and willingly release them, not cling to them – that is true preaching, the preaching all of us are called to do, and it has more power than any clever turn of phrase I or anyone else will ever use from the pulpit. Our lives, in the end, will testify to what we believe by whether we hold tightly to them as our own, or place them in the hands of God, and at the disposal of our neighbors, whom God loves.

“No one has greater love than this,” said Jesus, “[than] to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”⁸ To live out such trust as this surprises people—they see someone unhesitatingly putting all his or her eggs in one basket, all things in the hands of God, living as if it is really true that losing this life is not losing everything.

On a cold winter night in February of 1943, a small caravan of transports worked their way across the North Atlantic, carrying soldiers, civilian support staff, and crew. The U.S. Army Transport *Dorchester*, a converted former passenger liner, was only 150 miles from its destination, a port in Greenland. It was cold outside, but deep inside the crowded ship it was hot and uncomfortable, enough so that many of the 902 men aboard had removed the life jackets that the captain, knowing of submarine danger in the area, had ordered to be worn. A German U-boat found them just past midnight. A single torpedo hit was enough to doom the ship.

The order was given to abandon ship, and chaos ensued. Some had died in the explosion, others were met by fast-encroaching water in a now-dark hold. Some of the lifeboats drifted away before they could be boarded, and others were capsizing with too many aboard.

Four men, Army chaplains George Fox, Alexander Goode, John Washington, and Clark Poling, found one another and stepped forward in the mist of this deadly bedlam. They began calming people, praying with people, assisting people to safety, and handing out life jackets. When no more life jackets could be found, without hesitation they removed their own and handed those out as well. At the end, they were finally seen standing together, with linked arms, on the deck of the ship as it sank below the freezing waves, loudly singing hymns and praying. Those four men were among the 672 who died there that night. Of the 230 who survived, many who saw the four in action said they had never seen anything in their lives like the selflessness of those chaplains.

Love, too, is a holy mystery...and grace, and forgiveness, and resurrection. We cannot comprehend them. There are things we can speak abstractly about and can go no further. Our words can only take us so far. So make then your life a sermon. You have standing to preach it by the fact that today you are standing on the deck of this ship. One day you and I, too, will slip below the waves. May God grant that someone out there will have received a life jacket at our hands, and that we may boldly and faithfully go, with linked arms, standing tall and giving hope to all those who witness our lives. Amen.

⁸ John 15:13 (*NRSV*).