

May 26, 2024 – Trinity Sunday B
Westminster Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Illinois
RCL texts: Isaiah 6:1-8; John 3:1-17
Sermon: *When the Spirit Moves*
Rev. Ann Schwartz

Isaiah 6:1–8 is a foundational passage in the book of Isaiah. It captures a pivotal moment in the life of the prophet. He encounters the glory of God and receives a commission to speak to a people who see and hear but never understand. This text describes the revelation that shapes Isaiah’s identity, his mission, and the timeless nature of divine encounters with humanity.

Isaiah 6.1-8

In 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. Seraphs 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. And one called to another and said: “Holy holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And 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!” Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The 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.” Then 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!”

Today on the Christian calendar is Trinity Sunday. The doctrine of the triune God was the early church’s attempt to explain the mystery of who God is and how God is present to us. Today’s text from the Gospel of John is one of the few stories in which all of the Trinity’s persons appear—God, Son, and Spirit. In it, Jesus explains to a disbelieving Nicodemus, what it means to be loved and changed by God.

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He 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.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus 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?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The 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.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”

Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

“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. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“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. “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.

When he was pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, John Buchanan wrote about a Sunday service in which he baptized a two-year-old. After scooping water onto the boy’s head, Buchanan rested his hand there and said what Presbyterian pastors say, “You are a child of God, sealed by the Holy Spirit in your baptism, and marked as Christ’s own forever.” And the little boy looked up and said, “Uh-oh.”

The congregation laughed, of course, but as Buchanan reflected afterwards, the response was appropriate, “a stunning theological affirmation” from the mouth of a child. The “uh-oh” was a recognition that everything had changed, that the boy would never be the same, that he no longer belonged only to the family who accompanied him to the font. He had been born again, born of water and the Spirit, who would transform him in ways he and those present could not know or imagine.

While he may not have been a boy, I imagine that Isaiah is a fairly young man when in worship he has a life-altering vision of God. The language he uses to describe the encounter captures the radical holiness, otherness, and expansiveness of the divine. In the midst of all that, Isaiah issues an “uh-oh” of his own. He is humbled by the overwhelming Godness of God and struck by his own unworthiness, sin, brokenness, and inadequacy—and that of his people. When God speaks, asking, “Whom shall I send?” to do the hard work of calling a nation to repent of its sins and partner with God in healing the world.

And here’s the reason I suspect that Isaiah is young—or at least new to the role of prophet. He responds immediately, “Here I am, send me!” He doesn’t contemplate the wisdom or the consequences of his impulsive reply. He doesn’t check his calendar or analyze the cost-benefit ratio of saying yes to the creator of the universe. You know, like an adult would. He just steps forward and accepts the call enthusiastically, no questions asked. Because in the very moment he knows that he is forgiven by God—he is freed and empowered to do a thing he couldn’t do otherwise . . . leave worship and serve.

Nicodemus is clearly not a child. He is a Pharisee, literate and learned, credentialed and connected. As the most educated of the religious authorities, they are the possessors of knowledge, the keepers of truth, the teachers, defenders, and protectors of their religion's rituals, practices, and doctrine.

And that is why, just days after Jesus raised a holy ruckus in the Temple, overturning tables and driving out the sellers and money changers, an inquisitive Nicodemus visits Jesus late one night under the cover of darkness, symbolic of both his desire for a confidential encounter as well as the state of his understanding.

This man who knows so much is immediately confounded when Jesus speaks to him of new life. "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above," which can also be translated "born again." And that is exactly how Nicodemus initially understands it, his rendering of deep mystery so literal that he completely misses the point, saying "I'm a little old to climb back inside my mother's womb and come out again."

Jesus is compelled to explain that the new life possible through him is not the product of a mother's labor and not a birth into a finite, earthly life but rather a Spirit-led transformation into everlasting life. Being born anew cannot be compelled, controlled, or managed by Nicodemus or by any human initiative. The realization sinks in for the Pharisee, that with all his knowledge and power and connections—giving himself over to Jesus requires a relinquishing of himself. "The 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."

That was as contrary to Nicodemus's sensibilities as it is to our own. Salvation does not come from our own striving, our own will, our own piety, our own understanding. In all those things, we are limited. Salvation does not come from the scriptures we have memorized, the books we have read, the prayers we have prayed, the acts of goodwill we have undertaken. In all those things, we are limited. Salvation does not come from our intellect, our certainty, our mastery of doctrine, our deep convictions. In all those things, we are limited. Salvation to eternal life is not an achievement, an accomplishment. It is a gift, given in love, by our God, as we surrender to the love of God.

As scholar Debie Thomas writes, "What Jesus was offering Nicodemus was not a tune-up, or a few minor tweaks to an already near-perfect life; it was a brand new life. A new birth. A fresh, down to the foundations beginning. What newborn enters the world without birth pangs, shock, disorientation, or pain? Downright bewilderment isn't the exception in a birth story; it's the rule. If we don't find Christianity at least a little bit confusing, then perhaps it's not Christianity we're practicing" <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2548-where-the-wind-blows>.

The loving, creative, transformative, and life-giving work of God in us and in the church and in the world is powerful, unpredictable, and ongoing. May we, whom God has called to live into the mystery that is faith and life in Christ, trust the Spirit to move where she will in and among us, knowing that we will be born again and again into the kingdom of God. Amen.