

Isaiah 6: 1-8; John 3: 1-17
Loved into Salvation

Today is Trinity Sunday. The doctrine of Trinity is this notion that while there is only One God, this God is in three distinct persons, as the Father, the source of everything, the Son, who is the God who descended from heaven to be with us, and the Holy Spirit who is the breath of God that moves and works through, among and within us, so we can serve God in the world in our own time and place. So, we celebrate Trinity on Sunday after Pentecost when the Spirit has come to us.

You won't find the doctrine of Trinity as such in the Bible, but people perceived these three aspects of God expressed in the Bible and also noticed that we seem to experience God in these distinct ways. And when the leaders of the early church got together to put it in exact words, they couldn't quite agree beyond One-in-three and Three-in-One, and the preachers are warned not to try to explain it in a sermon, because that is a sure way to commit heresy, or a wrong teaching, besides putting people to sleep. So, instead, through our worship, you are invited to open your hearts and mind to the mystery of God who has brought us into being, who reaches out to us in our own terms, and who continues to live in us to lead us to ever-lasting life.

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!'

This is Isaiah who became the Temple prophet, an official adviser to the king, telling the story of his encounter with God that changed him forever. It is an intense story of transformation. When this happened, in the 8th century BCE, the house of Israel was split between the northern Kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, with Jerusalem as

the capitol where the Temple was. The time was fraught with political tension, not just between the two kingdoms but also involving the surrounding kingdoms. Death of a king meant a shift in these sensitive geo-political dynamics, and God needed someone to deliver God's word to the kingdom of Judah. This was the backdrop of Isaiah's encounter with God in the Jerusalem Temple that day.

While he was in the Temple, God's house, he saw God, sitting on the throne, high above, his presence filling the Temple with holy smoke. As Isaiah stood there in awe, it dawned on him that he was a man of unclean lips and he lived among the people of unclean lips! It's a strangely specific concern. We don't know if Isaiah had any inklings at that point that he'd be called to serve as the temple prophet, but if he were to be a prophet, a God's mouth-piece, then yes, unclean lips would be a problem.

Coming into the presence of God, Isaiah became keenly aware of his inadequacy precisely in the area where he needed to excel in order to be of any use to God. By human measure, he must have been good enough, to be allowed access to the Holy Temple, but he knew in his heart that by the divine measure, he was unfit. To encounter the Holiness of God is to acknowledge one's own unholiness.

As he stood there now terrified and in dismay, what happened next is that God's heavenly helpers Seraphs, literally meaning "fiery ones," descended from above with a live coal from the altar and touched his mouth. And that action from above took away Isaiah's guilt and blotted out his sin. Isaiah and his lips were given another chance, renewed by God who removes our unfitness and fits us for service for a new purpose. It was like Isaiah was born again.

We experience this transformation through the encounter with God, often through suffering. Or God might be at work in our lives at all times, but we seem to perceive it and be open to be transformed by it more readily through the passage of suffering.

What do you think it was like for Isaiah to have his unclean lips touched with a live coal? Couldn't you almost hear his lips singe, ouch! as the 'uncleanliness' on his lips were burnt clean? We don't hear it very often anymore, but when I first learned that, in this country there was a practice of washing with soap the mouths of children who said naughty things, it made me

think how cruel. Such a human punishment might only leave bitter taste in the child's mouths, and I cannot imagine many kids being transformed through such experience.

But the effect on Isaiah of having his lips singed with the holy burning coal was that it gave him genuine confidence that God could now use him, for his heart was already willing. It was honest confidence and not arrogance, because Isaiah knew his lips were unclean and he lived among people with unclean lips and so there was no escaping, and yet God sent the divine servants from above, to make him whole as a prophet, fit for God's service; it was God's doing. Isaiah would not trust his own ability to clean up his lips, but he trusted what God did for him and for what purpose.

Our suffering comes in many different forms. Changing our habits, our way of depending and relying on things other than God, our addiction, our security blanket, our co-dependency, our need for control, our misplaced devotion and passion, misplaced confidence in our own ability and strength, misplaced trust in false gods... admitting them as our brokenness and letting go of all that, even it is to let ourselves be touched by the Divine love, causes us suffering.

Yet, God comes to us with God's longing for us, to transform us to live a new life where our desire and God's desire are in sync. The suffering is not the end, it is a passage to what God's abundant love has in store for us, a life transformed, which is our salvation. God loves us into salvation.

Though Isaiah's transformation seems to have happened in "one sitting" with God, so to speak, he continued to ask questions to God and struggled at times to bring God's word to people, because he couldn't see the entirety of God's plan. We don't ever comprehend God's way entirely, and God can take time, or we need to take time, being transformed over our life through many encounters with the divine, each time, growing deeper and coming closer to the yearning heart of God.

Today's Gospel reading is another story of human encounter with God. It happened hundreds of years after Isaiah's encounter with God who sat on the throne high above in God's House. This human encounter is with God who came down to live among us. Hear now, the Gospel according to 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.

Here, Nicodemus who is a religious leader with learning, comes to Jesus “knowing” who Jesus is, or so he thinks. Nicodemus has seen the signs that tells him who Jesus is, according to what he already knows. In other words, Nicodemus judges Jesus by a human measure, to be a teacher who came from God. But Jesus corrects Nicodemus’ thinking, saying, you don’t know what you’re talking about when you speak of heavenly things, because no one can without being born from above. But here Jesus uses the word “from above “ which also means born again. So, there is this going back and forth with Nicodemus who understood what Jesus said in temporal terms, “again,” when Jesus was speaking in spatial terms “from where, from above.”

Nicodemus’ encounter with Jesus shatters his narrow understanding of what it means to be born, again or from above. Jesus helps him further to understand it means to be born not only in flesh, out of the womb, but be born of the Spirit. Nicodemus was a teacher, fit to teach by the standard of his religious tradition, but in encountering Jesus, his ignorance and lack of understanding of heavenly things, spiritual things, things of the kingdom of God was exposed. Just as Isaiah realized his lips are unclean making him unfit to be God’s prophet, Nicodemus is challenged to look at his own lack of understanding, which is what a teacher. Would Nicodemus allow himself to be transformed, letting go of his way of knowing, and be open to Jesus’ teaching. We only have some hints; we see Nicodemus at two more occasions in John’s Gospel,

when Nicodemus defends Jesus when he is being tried, and when he brings spices to bury Jesus properly. We see him in the process of being transformed.

The world is full of Nicodemuses, but God sent Jesus into the world so anyone who let their lives touched by Jesus would be healed, just as the live coal from the alter touched Isaiah's mouth and made it clean, fit for the purpose.

Eternal Life in John is the transformation of our lives as a result of our encounter with Jesus, God with Us. It is life lived in an unending presence e of God. To be born from above is to be born again through the lifting up of Jesus on the cross. Through his suffering on the cross, we who trust in him we pass through death and is born to new life.

This movement of being called into Gods presence, recognizing and acknowledging our brokenness, and confessing it to God with an openness of our hearts to be transformed by God, and then be sent into the world in service to God's plan for God's beloved world is the rhythm and pattern of Christian life, and through this process, we are Loved into becoming who we are, one belonging to God and, sharing in Christ's eternal life, which is our salvation.

For Christians, who have joined the church as the living body of Christ in our world, this encounter with God happens in our corporate worship. Gathering/Call to Worship – Confession/Pardon – Word – Sending. Worship as the meeting ground between God and humanity. We are the resurrected people who have received the Spirit. And God invites us to be born again, and again, and again.