

“Holy, Holy, Holy”

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis

Holy Trinity 2018

Isaiah 6:1-8

Last week we had an amazing celebration of both Confirmation and that great Festival of the Church, Pentecost. The Holy Spirit made herself known in so many ways but the one I want to lift up is in the Faith Statements made by our four confirmands, Greyson, Calvin, Julian and Sara.

Frankly, I think just being able to stand up here is evidence of the Spirit’s presence, but they didn’t just stand up there. They wrestled with how to put into words what they believe about God. And, just like Peter preached on that first Pentecost—using the words of the ancient prophet, Joel--the Spirit was poured out on these young people and they shared their faith.

What they shared is worth reflecting on, so we’ll be putting their statements in the Messenger—and we’ll also have some copies of their statements printed up and available next week. I’m wondering if trying to put some words around what we believe about God is something that others of us might do—God’s spirit is not just poured out on the confirmands.

So, today it’s my turn because it’s Holy Trinity Sunday—the one day focused on a doctrine rather than a story. But I’ve been inspired by the willingness of the confirmands to try to talk about who God is, so I’m coming to the task with their unique and personal faith statements as an encouraging backdrop.

I’ll get to the Trinity part but I first want to focus on what it means to use the word *holy* to describe God.

I was at the Festival of Homiletics for most of this past week. It’s an annual preaching conference and it was here in DC this year.

All day long there are worship services with sermons and then lectures about sermons. This is not the conference for everyone! But I find it such a blessing. In addition to what I learn, there’s something really encouraging about being with 1700 other people who have the privilege and the burden of trying to hear a word from God and preach it almost every week.

The singing at the worship services is so robust and full-throated. When you’re usually the worship leader, it is so refreshing to relax and just participate—so people really sing. In one service, we were singing that great Trinity hymn that we’ll sing as our sending hymn. But for some reason, they hadn’t made a slide of the words. It seemed like almost everybody knew the first verse by heart. But we were all much less sure about the other verses—except for these words, “holy, holy, holy.” Whenever we got to that part, there was a surge in the singing.

And, it made me think, “Maybe those are the words we are most certain of when we talk about what God is like.”

But then I wondered how well we understand that little word, “holy.”

When I say, “holy” what’s the first thing that comes to your mind? I was going to ask people to shout them out but then I realized that if it wasn’t Holy *Communion*, it was going to be an expletive that we’d rather not hear right now.

But what does holy *mean*? How would you define it? Ideas about synonyms?

I’d like to turn to our reading from Isaiah because it not only shows us where a piece of our liturgy comes from, it gives a great picture of Holy. In the setting of the liturgy we’ve been using, you can hear this scripture from Isaiah very clearly in the “Holy, Holy, Holy,”—also known by its Latin name, “Sanctus”.

There is a lot going on in this vision report Isaiah gives us. I'm going to say up front that this is not my favorite genre. This is a story for people who really get into sci-fi and fantasy. This is a story for the people who love Star Wars and The Lord of the Rings—and I know there are plenty of you—so even though it's not my genre, I'm glad we have this story. This picture of God. This picture of what it's like to be in the presence of the Lord.

God is way, way up there on the throne. And God's robe is so massive it fills the whole Temple. The building is shaking. Smoke is everywhere. And these creatures called seraphs are surrounding the Lord—doing I don't know what—because, when you are the Lord God Almighty what do you need to have done for you? These seraphs should be in a movie. I'm not sure anyone but Isaiah ever saw them but the general consensus is that they are giant serpents with wings.

Giant serpents with wings—who sing! They sing the liturgy--“holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” Picture that today when we sing this story!

I've got a lot of respect for Isaiah because—number one—he's still there. He did not hightail it out of there when all this crazy stuff started happening. He is afraid—but he is also in awe. And not only does he see the Lord, he sees himself and his people. He's got a whole new, world-altering perspective.

I know that some of us don't like to talk about the fear of the Lord but if ever there was a picture of the fear of the Lord this is it. I like the word *awe*. But fear is a part of it. It's when we recognize that God will not be constrained by our ideas about God. God is bigger and wilder than our thoughts about God. God can be counted on but God is not predictable or tame. *God is holy*.

When you come to see this—when you have your own Isaiah experience—*it is not comfortable*. It feels like a seraph touching a hot coal to your lips. And it makes you a lot more humble when you speak about God—*because your lips have been seared*.

Which makes this an interesting reading for Holy Trinity Sunday—the day that begs for us to bring some definition as to who God is.

Richard Rohr is a Franciscan priest and a contemplative theologian. He does some beautiful thinking around what the Trinity means. And one of the things that he says about the doctrine of the Trinity echoes Isaiah—he says this hard to pin down doctrine should forever keep all of our God-talk humble and stuttering. The Trinity is such a mind-blowing idea that it's got “holy” written all over it—because it just doesn't fit comfortably into what we know.

But maybe like Isaiah, we can stay in the presence of this three-person God that is still one. We can linger in this place that doesn't fit so easily into the way the world is.

That's what Richard Rohr has done—and what he's found is that—strangely—*it is* how the world is. We talk about God in three *persons*—the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The word *person* literally means “sounding through”. Each person in the Trinity sounds through the others.

We think of “person” and we immediately hear “individual”—as in “I am my own person.” But the actual original meaning of the word comes from this way of understanding God—as three persons, three faces, that were completely interrelated.

Amazingly, it turns out that the Trinity is actually a blueprint for all of reality—from atoms to galaxies. It's the way ecosystems and relationships essentially work. There is a fundamental interconnection. In the Trinity, each person exists and acts but always as a part of a larger, shared reality.

We may try to run from that truth—that who we are and what we do always affects a larger reality—but that does not make it less true.

I know a lot of us struggle to understand the Trinity—we wrestle with it like a math problem or a puzzle, but Rohr encourages us to look at our own experience. He reminds us that we are created in God’s image and likeness. So, as we see just how connected we are to each other—and even to the other creatures and the earth and water and air around us—we get a glimpse of the interrelatedness of the Trinity.

In the group of youth going to Houston, we chose a name of someone to be our prayer partner. On Friday, I asked each person to check in with the one whom they were praying for, to see how they were doing and if they had any other specific prayers. And I realized that it would be a holy confusion because Calvin would be trying to talk to me and I would be trying to talk to Jennifer who would be trying to talk to Jewdell—and on and on. It wasn’t possible to have individual conversations because we were all connected—all interrelated. It wasn’t neat little pairs but a holy multi-celled organism.

In closing, I want to circle back to Isaiah—because I think both Isaiah and Richard Rohr show us that seeing who God is—is essential for seeing who we are. Even if we don’t fully get it. Even if we can’t fully wrap our minds around who God is.

I love this story from Isaiah—because it’s not just a story of a magnificent vision of God. It’s the story of how Isaiah responds. This is, apparently, the only example in the Hebrew scriptures of a prophet volunteering for the job. God expresses a need for a *person* to go and be the one that God can *sound through*—be the one that God can speak through.

But God never *asks* Isaiah. Isaiah *volunteers*. That’s his response to what he has seen of God.

So, today, we see a God in whose image we are made. A God in three persons who are deeply connected in love—but whose love is always pouring out. A God who loves beyond our wildest imaginings of what it means to love. I literally can’t imagine a parent who could give their child as fully as God has given Jesus—I can barely handle my daughter moving to New York!

But as we stand in the presence of this God that goes beyond our understanding, we hear that question—that carries with it a proclamation about who we are. “Whom shall I send?” “Who is the *person* who will be the one that I will sound through—the one who in their actions and in their words will speak of the way all of life is deeply interconnected? “Whom shall I send?”

And today, Holy God, when we hear you ask, may we volunteer. May we say, “Here I am; send me.”

Amen.