

The idea of the Holy Trinity is overwhelming. The Trinity is complex and counter-intuitive. How can three be one and one be three?

And so on Trinity Sunday every year, you often hear lots of explanations, lots of descriptions, lots of analogies, mostly bad analogies, that attempt to explain the Holy Trinity.

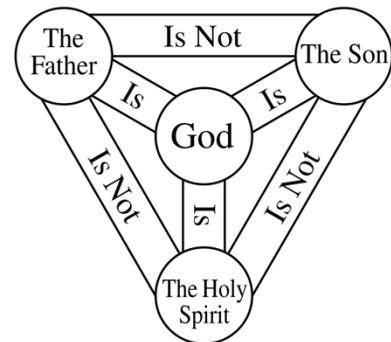
But these descriptions and bad analogies are, by definition, partial and incomplete. There's a technical term for such descriptions: heresies.

We think of heresy as a rather extreme and loaded word. But at heart, it's fairly simple and really benign. The word heresy at its root means "choice." And if you try to describe the complexities of the Trinity, you've got to choose to emphasize some aspects, which means that you're choosing not to emphasize other aspects.

So today on Trinity Sunday throughout the church, there will be lots of heretical sermons emphasizing the "three-ness of God" and lots of other heretical sermons emphasizing the "oneness of God."

That's what happens when limited human beings with our limited minds and limited language try to nail down a sacred mystery like the Holy Trinity.

Probably the best things humans have ever come up with regarding the Trinity is a classic graphic that I reprinted on the cover of your bulletin. It's called the "scutum fidei," the shield of faith. In the corners are the words, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the center is God. And there are connecting lines with words, either "is" or "is not." So they shield says in a very compact form, "The Father is not the Son. The Son is not the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not the Father. BUT... The Father is God. The Son is God. The Holy Spirit is God."



That's about as precise as we can easily get in describing the Holy Trinity. So I want to shift gears.

Today, I don't want to focus on explaining the Trinity. Rather, I want to instead focus on our response to the Trinity.

Let's just stipulate, our One God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That's a paradox and a mystery. Instead of trying to explain "how," I want to talk about "so what?" If God is Trinity, what does that mean for us? How do we respond to such a God?

And for one answer, I would turn to our Old Testament reading from Isaiah chapter 6.

This portion of Isaiah is hands down, absolutely, the most incredible vision of God anywhere in the OT, and maybe in the whole Bible. Isaiah 6 is a vision that just blows you away.

Isaiah begins, "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord."

Background: King Uzziah ascended to the throne at the age of 16. He then reigned until he was 68. In that time period, for one man to be on the throne for 52 years was almost unheard of. Given the average life expectancy in those days, there were people in Israel who were born, who lived, and who died knowing no other king but Uzziah. It's like England today. Queen Elizabeth II has been on the throne for 69 years. In my lifetime, there has been no other British Monarch.

In Israel, Uzziah's death after a 52-year reign must have left an incredible void, an incredible gap. The king in those days was much more important to people's everyday lives than Queen Elizabeth is today, even in England. The death of King Uzziah meant for his people that their sense of stability would be out the window.

And so, when Isaiah tells us, "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne," there is a strong message. Uzziah may be dead. There may be a vacuum on his earthly throne. But the real throne is still occupied by the Lord. Earthly kingdoms and governments may change and fall. But the Lord is still in charge. The Lord still sits on his throne.

And, Isaiah describes that throne. He tells us, the Lord's throne is high and lofty. Other kings may sit on a throne on top of a few steps. But the Lord's throne is far higher. In other words, it is above earthly limits. Earthly thrones are temporary and finite. But the Lord's throne touches eternity and infinity.

Next, Isaiah tells us, "the hem of God's robe filled the temple." In Biblical times, the length of your garment was a status symbol. Rich and powerful people could afford long robes. Also, rich and powerful people didn't have to do manual labor, where a long robe would get in your way. In Biblical times, the longer your robe, the more powerful you are.

And God's robe is so large that his train fills the entire temple. The hem of his garment takes up the all the space there is. In other words, God's power is far and above any earthly power.

And then, as if things aren't overwhelming enough, Isaiah says, "Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings." Seraphs or seraphim, along with cherubs or cherubim, were angels who had the special job of being in God's presence, offering ceaseless praise. Seraphim are traditionally pictured as having six wings. They only needed two to fly with. The other four wings are used to shield themselves from God's overwhelming glory.

Don't miss what Isaiah is telling us here. God's glory and holiness and splendor are so overwhelming that even the angels who were created with the express purpose of being in his presence are created in such a way that they can shield themselves from the immensity of his glory.

And the seraphs' job description is simple. They are in God's presence to offer ceaseless praise to his holiness. To be holy is to be so different, so above the ordinary, so glorious, so completely awesome and wonderful that nothing else can even begin compare. But the seraphs don't just say that God is Holy. They say, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts."

Holy, holy, holy. In Hebrew, repeating a word is a way of emphasizing that word. We sometimes do the same type of thing in English. Usually, they would repeat the word twice for emphasis. On very, very rare occasions they would repeat the word three times for extra emphasis. Notice I said, "Very, very." Maybe I should have said, "Very, very, very."

To say that God is Holy, Holy, Holy, is absolute superlative in Hebrew. At the very center of God's being is his holiness, his awesome otherness.

What would you do if you were privileged to have such a powerful and overwhelming vision of God's glory? Isaiah's spirit and his senses have to be completely overwhelmed.

He says as much. He says, "Woe is me! I am lost." In other words, 'I'm dead meat. I've had it.' Why? Because, "My eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

After all, even the glorious seraphs have those extra wings to protect themselves from looking upon God. But Isaiah comes into God's presence unprotected.

And there's nothing about Isaiah that makes him worthy to stand in God's presence. His terminology to describe this is being a man of unclean lips. He's unworthy. He's sinful and fallible. He doesn't deserve to be there. There's no way that he should be allowed to stand in God's utterly holy presence.

Yet, a remarkable thing happens. God does for Isaiah what Isaiah cannot do for himself. He sends one of the seraphim over to purify Isaiah. The seraph touches Isaiah's mouth with one of the coals from the incense brazier. And by doing so, Isaiah is ritually cleansed. His sin is wiped out. And after that, God commissions Isaiah to go out with a message, as a prophet of the Holy One of Israel.

There's a wonderful paradox here. God is holy. God is very different from us. God is far above us in every way that we can possibly conceive. God is supremely other. God is Holy, Holy, Holy.

And yet, God also does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. For Isaiah, God sends a seraph with a coal from the incense brazier. For us, God sends something even more precious. God sends his Son. And God sends his Spirit.

This same Holy God is made visible and knowable in the person of Jesus Christ. This same Holy God is wonderfully and intimately present with us and within us in the person of the Holy Spirit.

God enables us to stand in his presence and offer praise. The seraphim were created to offer praise and worship. We too are created to offer praise and worship. That's the most important thing we can do.

Let us bow in worship and adoration. Let us proclaim with the seraphim, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts."