

Epworth Chapel on the Green
June 7, 2009
Trinity Sunday
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Exodus 3:1-6
Psalm 93
Romans 8:12-17
John 3:1-16

Our cantors began our service this morning singing from the old hymn, “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise.” They sang about a God of pure light, a God so holy, so awesome, so powerful that he is inaccessible to us. They speak of a God whose holiness burns with such intensity as to consume all that is unholy. A God of such immense glory and holiness that often in the Old Testament when persons encountered it they did not live to tell about it.

This is the God we see in our lesson from Exodus this morning. Moses sees a bush that is burning brightly but is not burning up. He decides to investigate when he hears a voice that says, “Moses, DO NOT COME NEAR. Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground.”

This advice is not merely good for Moses, but is also good advice for us. For when we as fallen, sinful, broken creatures get even a partial glimpse of this God in all of his glory, we find ourselves in a situation similar to that of the prophet Isaiah.

Do you remember what happened to Isaiah? He tells us:

In the year that king Uzziah died I saw the Lord. He was sitting on a lofty throne, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Hovering around him were mighty seraphim, each with six wings. With two wings they

covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with the remaining two they flew. In a great chorus they sang, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty! The whole earth is filled with his glory!" This glorious singing shook the temple to its foundations, and the entire sanctuary was filled with smoke. Then I said, "My destruction is sealed, for I am a sinful man and a member of a sinful race. (Is. 6:1-5)

We are talking about a God this morning whose holiness and power burns with such intensity that it might be a very dangerous thing that we are even here! When you consider WHO God is, and when you consider WHO we are and what we have become, it's a wonder that all of us sitting here this morning have not been turned into little puffs of smoke!

What can poor, sinful, broken people like us do? What hope is there for us? What hope do we have, when even to catch a small glimpse of God is to die? How can we look upon this God, and live to tell about it?

Fortunately, there is a way. God has provided a way whereby we can look, where we can SEE him and not be consumed by the encounter.

How is this possible, one might ask?

The answer comes in our Gospel lesson, in these words from Jesus to Nicodemus:

For only I, the Son of Man, have come to earth and will return to heaven again. And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so I, the Son of Man, must be lifted up on a pole, so that everyone who believes in me will have eternal life. (Jn. 3:13-15)

In Jesus, the inaccessible God in all of his glory becomes accessible to us. In Jesus, we can look upon God and *live* instead of *die*. In Jesus, we see the heart of God to love us and save us, not destroy us. In fact, Jesus is the only way we can encounter a holy God and live to tell about it!

There was an old hymn we used to sing when we were younger. I never liked the hymn very much, but it is based on this truth from John's Gospel. It was entitled, "Look and Live." The chorus went, "Look and live, my brother live! Look to Jesus now and live! 'Tis recorded in his word, hallelujah, it is only that you look and live."

The reason we are sitting here today and not merely a pile of smoldering embers, is *Jesus!* In him, the God beyond our reach becomes reachable. In him, the God beyond our sight becomes seeable. In him, the God beyond our knowing becomes knowable. To look upon Jesus is to see God and live to tell about it.

But we should be careful not to think of this merely as some sort of forensic or legal transaction between us and God. We should not view this in some sort of sterile, antiseptic way, as if to say, "ok, I look to Jesus, I believe in Jesus, and so now my ticket is punched and I'm spared being turned into a puff of smoke."

That was not, and is not, God's design. God was not satisfied merely with allowing us to see him and live to tell about it. It is not enough for us merely to survive the encounter with God. For God desires *relationship*.

And the relationship God desires is not one based on fear, but on love. So, in a way you or I will never be able to comprehend, this God actually adopts us as his children. This God, the One who stands so far above us and beyond us that we can't come into his presence and live to tell about it, literally takes us into his family as his kids. And now the God of the universe gives us permission to call him "daddy."

You've got to be kidding, right?

A God so holy, so powerful, so pure, that one does not look on him and live -- and yet you and I can now call him "dad?"

How in the world can this be?

Well, listen to what Paul tells the Romans:

So you should not be like cowering, fearful slaves. You should behave instead like God's very own children, adopted into his family -- calling him "Father, dear Father." For his Holy Spirit speaks to us deep in our hearts and tells us that we are God's children. (Rom. 8:13-15)

So let me see if I have this correctly. We've gone from taking our lives into our hands just by entering this place this morning, to actually encountering God and living to tell about it because of Jesus, to the place where we can not only survive the encounter with God and live to tell about it, but live to tell about it as God's children who have the privilege of calling God our Father?

Such is the nature of the Triune God, the God we have come to know as Father, Son, and Spirit.

The church father Augustine was walking along the beach one day, reflecting on the doctrine of the Trinity and trying to make sense of it. He observed a young child with a bucket. The little girl would run to the water and fill the bucket, then return and pour it into a little hole.

Augustine approached the child and said, “little girl, what are you doing?”

She replied: “I’m trying to put the ocean into this hole.”

Trying to understand or explain the Trinity intellectually is somewhat like trying to pour the ocean into a hole in the sand, because it’s an attempt by the finite to grasp the *infinite*. Sort of like trying to comprehend how God uses ordinary stuff like bread and wine to change us and do his work in our lives. It is another one of those opportunities to ask, “how can this be?”

As we come to the Table this morning, let us come with humility and reverence. Let us come as those who seek understanding, but also as those who are willing simply to bow in the presence of the mystery, and to give thanks.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.