
Holy, Holy, Holy

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Trinity Sunday – Year B

*“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”* Isaiah 6:1-3

What time is it? What is this day, and month, and year? The ancient way of telling time began with saying what year it was, and that year was always described as the year of a certain king’s reign. Remember how the gospel of Luke, at the time of Jesus, describes the ministry of John the Baptist, beginning “in the fifteenth year of the Emperor Tiberias?” So it was with most all the prophets. The book of the prophet Isaiah begins by announcing what year it is, the year that King Uzziah died.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and 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.” (Isaiah 6:1-3)

Yes, in the year that King Uzziah died, the prophet Isaiah came to life! He began his public ministry in a spectacular divine vision. Isaiah saw the Lord, high and lifted up, and sitting on a throne; and his robe, his “train,” filled the temple. So great was the Lord’s presence that the angels surrounding him—they were called seraphs—covered their faces and their feet. They dared not gaze upon the Lord’s majesty, nor did they dare to step upon such holy ground.

But the angels were saying something. In fact, the angels were singing. They were singing a chorus, I believe, that has existed forever, from before time and forever. It is a chorus that we try to sing, too, every week, “Qados, Qados, Qados. Hagios, Hagios, Hagios. Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus. Holy, Holy, Holy.”

There are different words for “holy” in different languages, but every culture sings it. Holy, Holy, Holy. The word “holy” means “the presence of God.” To be holy is to practice the presence of God. To be holy is to acknowledge the presence of God. To be holy is to make room for God. To be holy is to sing the presence of God. The angels were singing “Holy, holy, holy” because they knew and rejoiced that they were in the presence of God.

In the Christian Church, we hear these words, we read about this vision, at a particular time of the year. Today is Trinity Sunday, one of the major feast days of the Church, and the only feast day—the only feast day—that commemorates a doctrine and not an event.

Yes, the other feasts of the Church observe events, or people: Christmas, of course, is the birth of Jesus, Easter is the Resurrection, Pentecost is the pouring out of the Spirit. But today does not seem to observe any biblical event or person at all. Today is called Trinity Sunday. There is no biblical passage that tells us exactly when the Trinity happened, and there is certainly no biblical passage that purports to “prove” the Trinity.

It is a doctrine, developed in time and tradition by the Church. And that word itself—the word, “doctrine”—has the power to put us to sleep immediately. So many of us dismiss doctrines to the realm of irrelevancy. What do we need “doctrines” for, we ask when we would rather have some experience, some spiritual experience?

Well, we certainly do not “need” doctrines. Instead, “doctrines” are those very principles that describe spiritual experience! In themselves, certainly, “doctrines” can become dry and irrelevant. But when we understand doctrines as a way of describing spirituality, then something wonderful and mysterious happens.

Especially this doctrine, the doctrine of the Trinity. “God is One, and God is Three.” That’s a simple enough definition for it. “God is One, and God is Three.”

I love this this doctrine, because it is completely illogical. It defeats our usual forms of logic and our linear thinking. In this age of idiotic fundamentalism, and rampant literalism, in the church—two twin dangers to our spiritual and imaginative life—the doctrine of the Trinity leads us away from shallow cerebral logic and into the depths of soul-ful spirituality. The doctrine of the Trinity leads us into the true mystery of knowing God with our full imagination.

God is One, and God is Three. How can something—anything—be one and three at the same time?

The various attempts in our tradition to answer that question are delightful! They are worth rehearsing! The Holy Trinity is like a cloverleaf, St. Patrick is reputed to have said (he didn’t say it): it is one leaf with three leaves. Or, God is like water, with the ability to take on three different forms: ice, liquid, or air. It is the same H₂O substance, but experienced as three different forms.

One year, from this pulpit, I presented an atomic model of the doctrine of the Trinity. God is one atom, indivisible, of three particles: proton, neutron, and electron. These three particles, or persons, if you will, swirl around one another in endless adoration and respect. They need each other to exist. From a distance, the reality of God appears solid and unified. Up close, God is still solid and unified, but God is also always in motion, always swirling about. One can never pinpoint exactly where God is, like an atom.

But, of course, most of you remember my favorite analogy of the doctrine of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity is like Neapolitan ice cream! It is not just vanilla ice cream, not just chocolate ice cream, not just strawberry ice cream! God is the best of all ice creams, all together!

Ultimately, it is the doctrine of the Trinity itself that reminds us never to take language about God to be literal. Is God a shepherd? Is God a literal rock? Is God a son? Is God a heavenly dove?

Yes, God is all these things, but God is not all those things literally. The doctrine of the Trinity allows the image of God to be more than one image. The spirit of the very doctrine speaks against narrow literalism. The doctrine itself proclaims various points of view about God!

When I imagine what Isaiah saw, in the year that King Uzziah died, and when the majestic train of God’s robe filled the temple, I imagine millions of angels, heavenly beings, all swirling around God from various angles. Yes, angles. A vision of the Trinity is part of a vision of “Angled Christianity.”

Healthy Christianity is able to understand the truth of God from various angles. And that has especially been the truth of our own tradition, Anglican Christianity. At our best, we understand that divine truth can be understood and experienced from different angles.

All those angels flying around the Holy of Holies, covering their eyes and feet with humble wings – all those angels are ascribing “holiness” to God from different angles. They are all singing “holy” from different places; and every angle creates a slightly different sound, so that the entire chorus is a spectacular harmony.

Isaiah’s angels singing “Holy, holy, holy” to God is the same vision I have when I consider the Holy Eucharist. Yes: the service, the liturgy, that we are participating in right now. In a few minutes, we will turn our attention—from wherever we are in the room—we will turn our gaze upon the altar. There will be priests and deacons and ministers there, and choristers and acolytes, and you and me, and all sorts of angels who have no name. In fact, we will claim that angels and archangels and all the company of heaven will be there.

And we will sing. We will sing, each from our own angle, “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts. Heaven and Earth are full of your glory.” “God is One. God is Three.” That doctrine allows us also claim that God is Many.

The Holy Trinity is really a harmonic song, a symphony, if you will, about relationship. The doctrine understands that it is not in a particular verse of scripture that we came to understand God, but in countless different stories of scripture that we came to understand God. Christians —over time—have come to understand God from different angles!

In one story of scripture, we learn that the God who created the world is a personal creator, like a Mother or Father. In another scripture we also realize that God actually became flesh among us, in Jesus Christ, the son. In still another scripture, we learn that God also moves and inspires and sets on fire ordinary people; this force, we call “Spirit.” Finally, God is truly all three of these persons: “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

However we describe the Trinity, one principle stands out: God lives in relationship. Even God, who is above all and in all, even God lives in relationship. In fact, God is relationship. God does not fit inside just one person. God is three persons living in the ongoing event of relationship. And those three persons, living in relationship, allow so many millions of us—living in relationship—to know God.

What time is it? When we are in loving relationship—as the model of Holy Trinity teaches us—when we are in loving relationship, when we are in true community, we escape ordinary time and we live in God’s time. It doesn’t matter whether we are in the year that King Uzziah died, or in the fifteenth year of Tiberias, or in the term of the forty-fourth president of the United States, or in the year 2015.

Except that we do mark our year, 2015, as what? Why, the year of our Lord, “Anno Domini!” We live in Christ. We are meant to live in Christ time. On this Trinity Sunday, to live in Christ time means to live in relationship, to live in community, to live in love. In that moment of mystery, when we sing “Holy, Holy, Holy” with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, we are in a glory community that transcends literalism and time. We are in the holy relationship of God.

AMEN.

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