

Trinity Sunday 2022

Isaiah 6:1-8

Revelation 4:1-11

John 16:12-15

The doctrine of the Trinity makes most preachers, including this one, a bit nervous and edgy, and that's precisely as it should be. Every time we go nosing around God's identity, mucking around in the divine mystique, we should be appropriately terrified. We Episcopalians sometimes lose sight of that. As Annie Dillard has written,

The higher Christian churches...come at God with an unwarranted air of professionalism, with authority and pomp, as though they knew what they were doing, as though people in themselves were an appropriate set of creatures to have dealings with God. I often think of the set pieces of liturgy as certain words which people have successfully addressed to God without their getting killed. In the high churches they saunter through the liturgy like Mohawks along a strand of scaffolding who have long since forgotten their danger. If God were to blast such a service to bits, the congregation would be, I believe, genuinely shocked. But in the low churches you expect it any minute. This is the beginning of wisdom.

I don't for a moment wish to claim that the doctrine of the Trinity, or any other doctrine, or that what we are doing here is infallible, or wise. Our doctrines and what we do with them, liturgically, politically, or socially are, like everything in this human life, a complex commingling of good and evil, of certainty and ambiguity, of tragic ruin and of amazing accomplishment. I do maintain that what we're doing on this and every occasion like it — that every God-given moment — is mystery. And mystery makes a lot of people very uncomfortable.

It terrified the prophet Isaiah. His description of his vocational vision reveals a profound confrontation with mystery. So shaken was he by his experience that he could pinpoint it chronologically. The death of a monarch is momentous, but in this instance the death of the king

is a mere reference point to mark what was happening in and to Isaiah. In the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah saw God. That vision was perhaps a little more colorful than any you or I have had, but in that vision Isaiah was aware that he was being called by God to serve in a particular way. The vision was a mystery; so was the message.

“Woe is me,” cried Isaiah — as any sane person might. “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.”

Why would God call Isaiah? Why, indeed, would God call any of us who serve God in many varied ways in our daily labors, our homes, communities and congregations? The simple answer to that question is also the most obvious: God calls us because God desires us, God wants us. God needs us to carry out God’s work in this world. But Isaiah’s vision didn’t end there.

“Then one of the seraphs flew to me,” he continues, “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!’”

Isaiah’s self-acknowledged sin — his unclean lips — are cauterized, the hot coal purifying them. It’s a severe image of a gracious act, for it symbolizes the forgiveness of his sin and the redemption of his weakness — a literal baptism by fire. Note that the seraph touches only Isaiah’s lips — his unclean lips — that God actually purifies and sanctifies the prophet’s *weakest* feature. Those unclean lips became the primary mouthpiece for God’s work in Israel. What a magnificent, miraculous mystery!

Yet such mysteries happen daily. Not perhaps with the flair of seraphs and flaming embers, but no less magnificent or awesome. Again, as Annie Dillard has put it, “Wherever we go, there seems to be only one business at hand — that of finding workable compromises between the sublimity of our ideas and the absurdity of the fact of us.”

Issues of who should be called to ministry or to marriage conveniently overlook that if there be scandal in *any* calling, it’s the scandal of *every* calling: it’s the scandal that God should call any of us, should want us, should redeem us, should even occasionally see God’s will fulfilled in us.

It’s truly scandalous. But let’s be clear about scandal: the word *skandalon* — the Greek word for scandal — is sometimes used in Christian scriptures to describe unseemly and embarrassing cases of human frailty or misconduct. But not always.

In the epistles of Paul and Peter, the word *skandalon* is never used to describe such offenses, even in the letters where those offenses are explicitly listed. In those letters the word *skandalon* is used in only one way: it’s used only to describe the Christ event. It’s the cross that’s a *skandalon*. It’s the Christ crucified who’s the *skandalon*, the stone rejected of the builders, the stumbling-block that became the head and cornerstone.

Thus we begin to see what it means to live into the scandalous mystery we proclaim in every Eucharist. Lutheran pastor and professor Joe Sittler relished the familiar parable of the prodigal as illustration of the discomfiting scandal of a Christian life:

...the old Jewish father, reared traditionally, ...does what was an incredible thing in a Jewish family: he runs down the road to meet his son who had demanded his part of the boodle and gone off. And now the son comes, full of pot as it were, up the road; and the old Jewish father does a shocking thing that reversed the traditional reverential distance between father and son. He leaves the religious dignity of his role as head of the family, and rushes down the road. He seizes the child and calls over his shoulder, “Put on a roast. Get him a ring for his finger and a garment.”

Every Jew who read that said, “Come on, that’s no way for a Jewish father to behave.”

But that’s exactly the way Jesus wanted it. He said, “No, that isn’t the way it is in life; but I’m talking about the kingdom of God, not about the kingdom of Judea. Cherish your discomfiture.”

So on this particular Trinity Sunday, on which Isaiah reminds us of what it means to come face to face with God, and the Eucharistic feast of Jesus reminds us of what a scandal his and our incarnation represents to the world, it seems only right and prudent that we should celebrate a significant anniversary of ordination — the commemoration of a commitment to vocation.

Fifty years ago yesterday, on the feast of the apostle Barnabas, commemorated June 11, Bob Petite was ordained a priest. It’s been said that coincidence is God’s way of keeping a low profile; the proximity of Barnabas and The Trinity on this year’s calendar is a fortuitous coincidence.

It was Barnabas who was sent to Saul, a murderous zealot who viciously persecuted followers of Jesus, who’d been mysteriously struck down by blindness on the road to Damascus. Barnabas drew close to this dangerous enemy, became his advocate and entree into the wary community of early apostles and believers. Paul had no place within the community until Barnabas befriended him and established it for him.

It was Barnabas who, in his senior capacity as apostle to Antioch, called the same Paul to be his assistant. The two worked side by side, cultivating the Church, welcoming non-Jewish converts, an act of hospitality that landed them in the center of controversy at the first council, convened in Jerusalem, to deal precisely with this issue of Gentile inclusion.

It was in Antioch among those who observed the work of Barnabas and Paul that the name "Christian" first attached to the community of those who believed in Jesus. But one

reference to him stands out above all the rest. It's the single and simple accolade which sums up Barnabas for all who would learn from him: "for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith."

"He was a good man." In this respect, Barnabas is an exemplary apostle of reconciliation, one of those rare individuals whose ministry is most remarkable for what he enabled and encouraged in others simply through relationship. His goodness was the result of his being full of the Holy Spirit and full of faith. He was animated by his proximity to and experience of the spirit that emanated from Jesus' relationship with God. He sought no reward or gain — indeed, he risked great loss and possible death in befriending Saul, in mediating and encouraging Paul's ministry. Moreover, there's evidence that he never received any wage from the congregations he served but lived off labor apart from his ministry. He did what he did, it seems, because it was something he loved doing, a tangible expression of the pleasure he derived from his relationship to God — a relationship mediated and encouraged by Jesus.

That he was sometimes embroiled in controversy for what he did is evidence that he was concerned more that the right and good thing be done than whether that thing be judged right and good by those who observed it. Like Jesus, there was nothing more important to him than God and God's family. Wherever that truth could be realized and practiced, Barnabas did so, even if it meant violating propriety and religious law; even if it meant making the rest of the church angry with him. He did what he deemed best and he accepted the consequences.

Barnabas seems an apt patron saint for our times: An apostle of relationship keenly needed in a world captive to forces of fear and division, a culture already deeply divided and intensely individualistic when pandemic drove it deeper into isolation, a people only tentatively

and tenderly emerging from a time of a disembodied existence alien to the family nurtured in Christ, sustained by incarnate, physical relationship.

In his parting words to the disciples in John's gospel, Jesus says "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." He tells them they'll eventually learn those things from the Spirit. The disciples can't bear those things — they're not up to the weight or the responsibility of those things — because those things are only accessed through relationship.

Well into my 74th year of life and 47th year of priestly ministry, I understand. And since Bob is a year older and three years more experienced, I trust he, too, understands, even better.

As children we have no idea the burdens or the rewards awaiting us as members of our families, as members of society, as members of the church, as sons or daughters, as priests, as spouses in our marriages. Those came, and continue to come, as we live in relationship.

Meanwhile, we're called to let go the futile and prideful urge to grasp at the Mystery that is God and content ourselves with the gifts of this limited but progressive learning accessible only in relationship. We must trust and be satisfied in this relationship that transcends time and space. We must trust and be satisfied in this relationship that predates our genesis, that pastors our present, that promises eternity. We must trust and be satisfied in this relationship until it please God to call and receive us into the mystery.

AMEN.

Sam A. Portaro, Jr.

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