

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL – 4 June 2023**  
**Holy Trinity - Year A**

**1st Reading: *Genesis 1:1—2:4a***

**Psalm: 8**

**2nd Reading: *II Corinthians 13:11-13***

**Gospel: *Matthew 28:16-20***

**Sermon - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø***

In the name of the Father, ✠ and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I was a lad I had this book, *The Bible in Pictures*. One of the pictures is of Isaiah's vision of God in the temple that we sometimes read on Trinity Sunday, from Isaiah 6:

"I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim... and one called to another and said:

'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;  
the whole earth is full of his glory!'

And the foundations of the thresholds shook... and the house was filled with smoke."



So this picture depicts God sitting on his throne in the temple, which is filled with smoke and incense, and Seraphim are flying around the throne and singing, "Holy, Holy, Holy". It's a bit scary, really, and maybe it's supposed to be, but sometimes I would stare at this picture, looking at the details of the face of God there and wonder, "Is this what God really looks like?"

Well, Trinity Sunday may be described as the Sunday when we ask, "What does God really look like?" And the answer we are given is that he is one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Now, pretty much every single sermon I have ever heard in my life on Trinity Sunday ends up saying that we don't really understand what this means. We can't comprehend God. It's a mystery. And we just have to accept it on faith. That is *not* what I am going to say this morning.

In some of my sermons I have tried to take you on a little adventure, and I've already promised some of you that our adventure this morning is really going to throw you for a loop. So let's start at the very beginning, which is where our first reading this morning did, indeed, start: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light." Christians have always read these opening words of the Bible as an affirmation of the Triune God. We have God the Father creating, God the Holy Spirit hovering, and God the Son, the Word of God, as the means through which God creates.

But there's an even more interesting description about God later in this passage when the creation of us human beings comes into focus. We read that:

"God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.'

So God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them."

Here we have the only statement in the entire Bible about what it means that we are created in the image of God. And it says that we are really one entity: "Man". Other translations will use more "inclusive" terms like "mankind" or "humankind" or "humanity". But those words are all collective terms, they refer to a group of lots of humans. The word "Man" here, as we see from what comes next doesn't refer to a male human being, but to humanity as a single individual., and there isn't a different English word that adequately expresses that. So just as there is one and only one God, the creature created in God's image is one creature: Man, and it says that God created him, singular.

But then it goes on to say "male and female he created *them*", plural. So we are saying that man, humanity, is both singular and plural, just as God is both singular and plural - one God in three persons. It isn't really that difficult a concept, it just means that the one and only one God is a complex entity, one God who is also three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It isn't *too* terribly different from saying that we have one body, which itself has various members, although it isn't *quite* the same. God is, after all, more complex than we can imagine.

And our other texts this morning go on to affirm the same thing. Paul ends his second letter to the Corinthians with the greeting we use near the beginning of all our services: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you" - Son, Father, and Holy Spirit blessing us as one God.

Jesus, too, affirms the Trinity when he tells the disciples to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”. One name, not three names - one God in three persons, but only one God.

So now let's go back to that vision of Isaiah's, and that rather frightening picture, in which the Seraphim, angels of flame with six wings, sing, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory!” The church has always considered this song to be in praise of the Trinity - three-times holy - Holy is the Father, holy is the Son, holy is the Holy Spirit.

In a few minutes we will be singing one of my all-time favourite hymns - certainly in my top 5 - “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty”, which itself is based partly on Isaiah's vision. “Holy, Holy, Holy” is a great hymn not only because of the content of its text, but also because we sing it to one of the most uplifting tunes and harmonies found in any hymnal. And it has become even more dear to my heart because the music for this hymn was written by John Bacchus Dykes, who was the Precentor (the person in charge of the liturgy) at Durham Cathedral in the North of England in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, and during our own years of worshipping in Durham, we were privileged to become friends with one of his successors in that role, David Kennedy.

Now, when we sing hymns, we can find out some interesting things about them by studying the little clues printed in most hymnals. For instance, if we look in the bottom right corner of any page, we will find in all capital letters the name of the tune used for the hymn. In the case of “Holy, Holy, Holy” [hymn 413 if you want to look at it now], we see that the name given to Dykes' tune is “NICAEA”, in recognition that the hymn reflects not only Isaiah's vision, but also the Nicene Creed, which was written at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. Hold on to that thought for a moment.

We do also sing the words “holy, holy, holy” every Sunday when we have communion, in honour of the Trinity, joining with angels and archangels, with the church on earth and all the hosts of heaven, again echoing the hymn of the flaming seraphim in Isaiah 6, praising God. So when we sing this at the Eucharist, we are singing together not only with the angels, but with all the Saints and with the whole Church - past, present, and future - praising the Triune God whose truth we affirm in the Nicene Creed.

And now let's focus in on one of those Saints in particular with whom we are singing, one who is not usually recognised for saying “Holy, holy, holy”, but who *is* known for saying “Ho ho ho” - Saint Nicholas, whom we tend to refer to as Santa Claus. So there it is. You probably didn't expect to come to church this morning to hear me talk about Santa Claus, but maybe we have good reason to remember him more on Trinity Sunday than at Christmastime.

Saint Nicholas was, of course, a real Saint. He was bishop of the city of Myra on the southern coast of what is now Turkey, until his death in AD 343. [Saint Paul had stopped in Myra on his way back to Jerusalem in Acts 27.] Saint Nicholas was a wonderful person, a dedicated Christian, who secretly did good deeds for the poor, and especially for poor children, which is why his spirit lives on in those who now secretly do good deeds in his name at Christmastime. But there is one episode in his life which does not usually get much attention.

As I said, Nicholas was bishop of Myra for many years until his death in AD 343, so he was bishop in the year 325, and attended that very important Church Council convened in the city of Nicaea, only about 400 miles north of Myra, where the divinity of Jesus and the truth of the Triune nature of God were affirmed. And let's note that in only two years from now, AD 2025, we will be commemorating the 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, so hopefully there will be some fun events planned in the world-wide church for that occasion.

What this Council discussed were the ideas of a particular bishop named Arius, who claimed that Jesus was not God. The bishops at the Council debated what the Scriptures say about this, and then there was a vote. 314 bishops affirmed Jesus' divinity and the Trinity. Two bishops voted the opposite way. Arius had managed to convince only one other bishop that his views were correct. The rest affirmed what the church had been teaching all along about the Trinity, and put together the original version of what we now call the Nicene Creed to make that teaching clear, affirming in no uncertain terms that Jesus is "eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father".

It did not dither and say that this is an incomprehensible idea, but that it was the truth which God himself had revealed to the church, through Jesus, through the Scriptures, through the presence of the Holy Spirit. And what this truth tells us is that God is not just a one-dimensional, unapproachable, inflexible entity. Instead, he is by his very nature a God of relationships, a God of love between Father and Son, Father and Spirit, Son and Spirit, and so a God who also wants to have a relationship of love with us. *This* is what God looks like.

But wait a minute. There's one more detail about the Council of Nicaea worth hearing about. During the debate, one particular bishop - Saint Nicholas himself - was so upset about what Arius was claiming that he physically slapped him across the face for daring to despise the divinity of Jesus and the glory of the Holy Trinity. And just perhaps... that is why we say that Saint Nicholas "knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake". He knew that Arius had been very bad, indeed. [But Nicholas was also a little bit bad for slapping him, and he was reprimanded by the church for doing so. Nobody, not even Saints, are perfect.]

So on this feast of the Holy Trinity, it is right for us to celebrate together with Saint Nicholas, bishop of the Church, champion of the truth of the Trinity, lover of the poor, and secret doer of good deeds. And perhaps we now know one of his secrets: When we hear his jolly laugh, it is his way of rejoicing in the glory of the Trinity: Next Christmas, when we hear his “Ho ho ho”, let us remember that this is really just shorthand for “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty”!

Amen.

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