

“Holy, Holy, Holy Is the Lord Almighty”

What is God like? It's an important question, because it is closely connected to the question of how we relate to God. “What is God like?” has therefore been a question that people have asked for ages. And they have come up with some answers on their own.

Some people expected to find god or gods in the forces of nature. They worshipped the sun, and envisioned a god who stood behind things like thunder and lightning. Other gods that people invented were surprisingly similar to the people who came up with them. These gods were sort of like superheroes. They were basically human beings with human personalities and ideas, but with super powers.

But the true God is not like that at all. The Bible reveals the true God to us, and tells us in many ways what he is like. The true God does stand behind the forces of nature in a certain sense, that being that he created the universe and by his power it holds together. As revealed in Scripture, God has immense powers, not like those of superheroes, but even greater. He is powerful over all things. He is present everywhere. He knows all things. These things describe what God is like in terms that we can at least somewhat appreciate if not fully understand.

But the Bible also tells us things about God that are much more difficult for us to comprehend. In fact, one of those things provides the theme of our worship service today: Holy Trinity Sunday. Trinity is a word that describes the truth revealed in the Bible. The word itself isn't in the Bible, but it was made to refer to the Bible's teaching. Trinity or the adjective Triune refers to the fact that there is only one God who is also three persons. A little later in today's service, we will speak the words of the Athanasian Creed, which describes this doctrine in some detail. In brief, it tells us that God is three persons, that is three distinct and separate personalities, and yet is only one, indivisible God. The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. Yet there is only one God, there are not three Gods.

If that seems hard to understand, we shouldn't be surprised by that. There is no precise analogy in the world. There are plenty of examples of things that we see that have three parts, or that appear in three different forms, but that's not what the Bible teaches about God. The persons of the Trinity are not parts of God, they are fully and completely God. And God doesn't just reveal himself in different ways or forms, the persons are distinct and relate to one another. What is God like? We can never fully appreciate how that question is answered, at least not in this life as we live in this sinful world.

But from time to time, God has given people a little bit more of a glimpse or insight into the answer to that question. In our sermon text today, God gave Isaiah a bit of insight into the question, “What is God like?” And it's interesting that on Holy Trinity Sunday, that specific doctrine is not the main point of the sermon text. And yet, when taken along with the rest of Scripture, this event in Isaiah's life gives us more information about our triune God. What is God like? Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord almighty!

You heard this lesson earlier in the service from Isaiah chapter 6. In these verses, Isaiah records how he was called to be a prophet. He saw the Lord's throne room, where he heard and saw the angels praising him. And those were the words they used: **“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”** Let's acknowledge right away that it doesn't seem to be a coincidence that the word holy is used three times to describe the Lord. The triune God is three times holy.

The word “holy” itself indicates a separation, that God is set apart. He is set apart from his creation; he is set apart from sin, perfect in all ways. His holiness is the opposite of sin, the opposite of us and all sinners. Even the perfect angels, created by God, hide their faces and their feet as they sing his praises.

And, of course, it is even worse for a sinful human being. Isaiah, taking in this incredible sight and hearing the amazing sounds, breaks down completely. **“Woe to me!” I cried. ‘I am ruined! I am a man of**

unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.” That’s what God’s holiness means for our sins. It means that they are totally intolerable. God demands perfection. He is surrounded by perfection and is perfection to its highest degree. Our sins and failures are not just a bad idea or an unfortunate happenstance. They are rebellion against God. They are repulsive. Isaiah knew it. He couldn’t take in that holy sight without feeling the weight and the burden of those sins. We ought to react to our sins the same way. We ought to react to God’s holiness the same way. Those two just don’t work in combination. The more we learn about and think about what God is like, the more we must realize that we don’t live up to his demands or his expectations. Woe to us! We are ruined! God is serious about our sins and we have failed him. He does not tolerate our sin, nor should we ever expect him to.

But the holy, almighty, triune God has an answer for sin. In Isaiah’s case, one of these seraphs, this six-winged angel, flew to him with a live coal taken with tongs from the altar. He touched Isaiah’s mouth with that live coal and announced that his guilt and sin were atoned for and taken away. God in his holiness determined to do away with Isaiah’s sin. And there is rich symbolism in the action of how that was done. The coal came from the altar, the place of sacrifice. The place that pointed ahead to a greater altar and a greater sacrifice, the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for the sins of the world.

That, too, is what God’s holiness means for our sins. He didn’t tolerate them, but in love made a way to forgive them. And his way of doing this in our lives is directly tied to the doctrine of the Trinity. The Father in love sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. The Holy Spirit testifies to this truth and changes our hearts so that we believe in it and trust God for our full salvation. What joy must have filled Isaiah’s heart when his terror over sin was removed by God’s grace! We have that same joy. We have deserved death, but God has given us life. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty! He has removed our sins forever!

God in his holiness has not only removed our sin, but he has also called us to service. Isaiah in our text was being called into service as a public minister of the gospel. He would serve God by going out with his Word for people. He would testify against them and their sins, and he would hold before them God’s love and his promise of salvation. In these few verses of our sermon text, God brings Isaiah from being a terrified sinner to being a willing and eager proclaimer of his Word. God even asks, **“Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”** Don’t miss the suggestion of the Trinity in those words either. And Isaiah answers. He is willing to go.

If you, like I did, watched the Seminary Call Service this past Thursday, you may have seen on the stained glass window of the seminary auditorium the words of Isaiah’s response, **“Here am I. Send me!”** For many years, these words on the stained glass have reminded graduating seminarians that like Isaiah, they are being called to serve by speaking God’s Word. Like Isaiah, they are not worthy of this honor because of their own holiness or perfection. They are given this opportunity because God in his holiness has forgiven their sins. God has moved their hearts to respond to his gracious invitation.

But the graduates of the seminary or any other pastors today are not the only ones to whom this lesson applies. Just as this text reminds all of us what God’s holiness means in regard to our sin, so it also reminds us of what it means for our service. Every one of us once stood before God as a sinner, and to this day our lives never escape the stain of sin. But praise be to him, God has forgiven our sins, and our response is to serve him! Certainly one way that we do that is by sharing his Word, by telling others that good news. But we also serve as we support that work and as we live lives that let our lights shine. Operating the sound system and video recordings, serving cookies in the courtyard, offering a warm welcome to our worship services—all are ways that you might serve God. And I could go on and on.

What is God like? He is holy. Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Holy, holy, holy. It means that our sins deserve punishment, but that he punished his Son in our place. It means that he deserves our thankful service. It means that he deserves our praise now and forever.

The text: Isaiah 6:1–8 (NIV84)

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. ³ And they were calling to one another:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

⁴ At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

⁵ “Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.”

⁶ Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷ With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

⁸ 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!”