

“Trinitarian Salvation”

Isaiah 6:1-8

May 27, 2018

The Holy Trinity

If you have been watching the NBA playoffs, you might've noticed how important the number three is now in the NBA. Everything is about three, it seems – if you listen to the announcers. Modern NBA shooters step behind the three-point line and launch three-point shots from three-point land in order to score threes, build up the offense quickly, and win the game and series. Some say the three-point shot is ruining the NBA while others think that it is the reason for the success of the NBA. Whether you like it or not, it's all about three.

If you have been paying close attention to the liturgical calendar and noticed the celebration today of the Holy Trinity, you may have noticed how important the number three is for this, as well. Everything is about three, even more than you may think. Three describes the nature of God. Three also describes the nature of salvation. And three even describes the effects of salvation on our lives. And, if you saw me plan the sermon or listen closely like a catechumen preparing a sermon study, you'll know that this means we are going to have a sermon with three parts and with each of these parts having three sub parts. It's all about the three.

We start off by confessing that three is the nature of the one true God. This does not mean that there are multiple gods, as many ancient cultures professed. Israel was unique among the nations in worshiping and believing in one, and only one, God. The great creed or confession of faith of the Israelite nation is found in Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.”

Yet, there is a “three-ness” within this one true God. In coming to terms with this, the early Church had to search for words to describe the indescribable. It spoke of three “persons” in this one God. The Church came up with the word – “Trinity” – to describe this three in one nature of God. While we can confess the nature of God as three in one and one in three, as we did today with the very demanding and repetitive Athanasian Creed, we are unable to understand or explain it. Those who try to explain it fall into serious heresies in which Jesus is less than fully God; all of the persons are merely masks of one true God; or the three are separate independent gods combined together.

The threefold nature of the one true God is this: God is Father, God is Son, and God is the Holy Spirit. Although the persons of the Holy Trinity cannot be separated, we often discuss them separately with regard to the nature of their work. God the Father is the Creator and Sustainer of all that exists. He is ruler and judge overall.

God the Son is the Redeemer and Savior of the world. He rescues people from the guilt of their sin by taking that guilt upon Himself and offering His life as the sacrifice for all of human sin. He empowers people to survive death and live forever by Himself rising from death to life again. He has death earns forgiveness for us. His resurrection earns eternal life for us. He will also come one day to take on the task given to Him by His Father to judge all people, those who live and those who have died.

God the Holy Spirit is often called the Sanctifier. “Sanctify” means to make holy. The Holy Spirit makes people holy by bringing Christ to them, converting them to faith in Christ, so they might receive the gifts of forgiveness and new life which Christ earned for them by His death and by His resurrection from the dead, thus making them holy in God’s eyes. The Holy Spirit also is the One who makes us to live a holy life. He does this with His chief tools of the Word of God, which condemns and punishes us by God’s Holy Law and which forgives and frees us by God’s Good News – the Gospel - and the life-giving and life-sustaining sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion.

Now this is all pretty much standard catechism instruction. As Bible believing Christians, we knew the threeness of the nature of God. But as far as the plan of God the Father to rescue us from sin and death and the devil through the working of His Son, Jesus Christ and testified to by, the Holy Spirit, where are the three units in that? Our Old Testament for today shows us this three-part plan.

First, it all begins with fear, a fear which the prophet Isaiah feels very intensely, yet one many people, even Christians, do not feel today. Why was Isaias so afraid? It was not the magnitude of the Lord’s presence which filled the temple. It was not the appearance of the seraphim, God’s angelic servants. It was not the shaking of the thresholds of the Temple or the filling of the Temple was smoke. Isaiah was afraid because he was in the direct presence of the holy God and he remembered the Lord’s answer to Moses when Moses asked to see God. The Lord God said, ““you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.” (Exodus 33:20)

Why the fear? Why the severe punishment? The Lord God is holy, a characteristic which we can barely imagine, much less comprehend and accept. This holiness of God means, among other things, that sin and evil cannot be tolerated in His presence. We, and all other people who have ever lived, are sinful, a characteristic which we try to deny and overlook. Yet it is our sin which earns instantaneous death and destruction in the presence of a holy God.

Isaiah understood this and was rightly afraid. Why are we not afraid? That is a good question. We may underestimate the holiness of God, the anger of God over sin, or the power of God to punish sin. We may overestimate our goodness in the sight of God. We all tend to think that we are pretty good, especially compared with other people. We may not think holiness is as absolute as it is. We may believe that God is only a God of love and not a God angry over sin. We may believe that God’s power to kill and destroy is kind of like our nuclear arsenal: something to be used as a threat, but never actually used.

We may think that God has somehow gotten softer. We divide God up into two entities instead of three. There was the mean old Old Testament God who is always smiting somebody. This God, people seem to think, has been superseded by the kind and loving New Testament God. This God only loves and never punishes anyone. Therefore, we should not be afraid of God anymore. Yet, when Peter witnessed our loving Lord divinely providing him and his partner fisherman with a great catch of fish, Peter did not run happily toward Jesus. Instead, Peter cried out, “Depart from me, for I

am a sinful man, O Lord.” (Luke 5:9) He was afraid and rightly so for he recognized that he was in the presence of God.

We may think that we should not fear God because we are His redeemed children. Yet Isaiah was a redeemed child of God. He was even a prophet and yet he feared being in the unmediated presence of God. We should fear God, too. He is holy and we are not. Neither of those things will change. We do not give up our sinfulness nor does God give up His holiness simply because He has redeemed us. Holiness and sin cannot coexist. God will destroy all sin. We should be afraid for that reason. Isaiah feared the terrifying marks of God’s holiness with the Temple shaking at its very foundation and smoke filling it, as well. We, too, should fear the threat of God’s terrifying presence on Judgment Day when all sin will be destroyed.

Our only hope is demonstrated by Isaiah. He does not try to hide his sin, deny his sin, or have the audacity to complain that God is not fair. Isaiah confesses his sin, short and succinctly, by saying “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

Our only hope is in confessing our sin. We dare not ignore or deny our sin. We dare not treat the holy God of Israel lightly or flippantly by deliberately sinning without thought or care. We fear God. We acknowledge our sin with sorrow and repentance. We throw ourselves completely and totally on the mercy of God without claiming any merit or worthiness in us.

The second part of our salvation (if you’re keeping track of the three parts I promised) is God’s undeserved and complete mercy. Isaiah does not bargain with God for forgiveness, but God takes the initiative and sends the seraphim to bring the fruits of the sacrifice on the altar to Isaiah. With tongs in hand, the seraph takes a burning coal and touches the lips of Isaiah, saying, “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

God operates the same with us today, in the New Testament times, as he did with people in the Old Testament times. He, the holy God, takes the initiative to rescue, rather than destroy, sinful rebellious people in His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus stood between us and God’s anger on the cross. He endured the wrath of God so that we would not. He died as the sacrifice for sin so that we would not die as punishment for our sin.

God sends His servants, pastors and teachers, to bring to us the fruits of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ from the altar. These gifts still touch our lips in the Lord’s Supper; our heads in Holy Baptism; and our ears in the teaching and preaching of the Word of God. We receive forgiveness and are reconciled with God.

And that leads us to the third part of our salvation journey. Isaiah is immediately transformed by the mercy and salvation of God to him. Before, Isaiah could not respond nor serve God rightly. But now, Isaiah hears the words of the Lord, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And Isaiah, freed from fear and guilt and the anger of God, joyfully responds, “Here am I! Send me.” Isaiah joyfully serves the Lord, not to earn the favor of God, but because he has the favor of God. He cannot help but serve.

It is the same for us who have been forgiven, restored, and saved from the wrath of a holy God through the death and the resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. Before we were reconciled with God, we didn't want to serve the Lord. Indeed, we couldn't serve the Lord because of our sin. However, now things have changed. The Holy Spirit, working through the Word of God, changes our attitudes and our desires. When God's gifts are rightly given and rightly received, the only choice that any Christian ever has in response to God's call to serve is the same as the choice Isaiah had: "Here am I! Send me."

The effect that this salvation journey has on all of us is, naturally, threefold (Are you surprised?) There is a slogan that encourages us in our service and in our work to be "ready, willing, and able."

Before all of this happened, we were not ready to serve our Lord. Our sin blocked out our ability to serve God and to serve each other as God desires. Now, having been forgiven of all of our sin, you ARE ready. God has resolved your situation with Him. You are no longer at odds with Him. Nothing stands in the way of serving God now. You are ready to serve.

Before all of this happened, you were not willing to serve the Lord as He desired. You were not willing to go His way. The Word of God says clearly, "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God." (Romans 8:7-8)

The Holy Spirit has changed all of this. In Holy Baptism, He has given you a whole new heart and a whole new life. Through the forgiveness of sins and the faith-strengthening power of the Word of God, you desire nothing more than to serve the Lord by serving other people.

Thirdly, and most importantly, not only are you ready to serve the Lord and willing to serve the Lord, you are able to serve the Lord. The Holy Spirit empowers you by the life changing power of the Holy Sacraments to lead a changed life in which you are able to do all that God has called you to do in service toward Him and in love toward one another.

It all comes down to numbers. One God, but three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. One plan of salvation, but three facets – fear/repentance, mercy/forgiveness, and a response of service. One life of service, but three aspects – ready, willing, and enabled. It's all about the threes. Amen.