

Captivating

Have you ever simultaneously felt awe, and terror, and maybe a sense of fascination as well? I'm a bit of an adrenaline junky, and if you also like roller coasters, you may have felt this too, standing in line at Six Flags staring up at Kingda Ka or some other giant coaster, marveling at the mechanics that will safely launch you forward at 128 miles per hour while holding a little bit of disbelief you are about to put yourself on this ride and trust it really will work. Or maybe you've had the crazy idea of jumping out a perfectly good plane, with more than butterflies in your stomach, but also being drawn to the idea of free falling, the feeling of rushing through air but feeling like it's hard to breath, and the overwhelming peace and serenity after the parachute opens, floating through silence, taking in nature. Turning to another, more down to earth example, a few years ago, I sat on a beach watching what had to be 10 or 11 foot waves, which were beautiful, and terrifying. I watched surfers who I both feared for and was impressed by, because the power of the water was immense, and I was glad to be safely sitting on the sand. Watching those waves was captivating, sitting in the presence of their mighty power and transfixing beauty, the water curving and breaking with rhythm and grace.

I think all of these feelings probably barely begin to scratch the surface of what Isaiah was feeling in this passage. It's a passage I really like for the call, or renewal of call, story we find there, and for the interaction with Isaiah, but let's be real, this is also a bizarre passage. Let's think about, and visualize, the scene being laid out before us. Isaiah sees God, which first off, we know doesn't happen very often. And either God is huge and takes up most of the space so the robe just borders God, or God has a robe on that puts the train of even Princess Diana's wedding dress to shame, because the hem fills the room. Then there are these seraph's flying around up above God, and who knows what size creature they are, but they have 6 wings, and when they speak, the timbers of the building shake and the room fills with smoke.

Awe, terror, and fascination. That seems to describe what this experience must have elicited within Isaiah, and maybe a few questions. On Monday, I was talking with a couple pastor friends about this passage, and we just started rattling off questions about it. My first question may not be the most important, or appropriate, but in Hebrew, "feet" is sometimes a euphemism for our reproductive parts. So are the wings covering literal feet, or covering something else? This lead us to more questions about these seraphs, like do they even reproduce, why do they have 6 wings but only fly with two, which seems highly inefficient, and do they have hands, or are they actually bird-like creatures with just wings and feet? If they don't have hands, what do they use to pick up the piece of coal to carry it to Isaiah's mouth? One friend thought they were fire creatures, and it does seem that in other, non-Biblical literature they may be referred to as dragons, but we also wondered how Dante and Milton have influenced how we visualize these creatures. Oh, and

what does God look like? We don't get any details on that, but how can you not wonder, when in most other passages no one is permitted to see God. What did Isaiah think as he beheld this scene, in the inner most section of the temple, known as the Holy of Holies, where, as one commentator put's it, the designs on the ark of the covenant come to life before Isaiah's eyes, as the "earthly temple and God's heavenly abode becomes blurred."

Isaiah is witnessing God, and it is hard to take in all that is going on here. But that's God, isn't it? It's hard to take in the vastness, the magnitude, that constitutes God's being. Today is Trinity Sunday, which reminds us God is so beyond our comprehension that it takes us three ways of knowing and experiencing God to try to capture all that God is. And the reason I share all those questions with you that we were asking about the scene in Isaiah is that I often feel like we need to bring all of our questions to the Trinity, because even in asking unanswered questions, our understanding can grow. Some of you may be asking for a reminder on how this whole Trinity thing works, so let me offer a little primer on the Trinity using the description offered by the Salt Blog:

The ancient doctrine of the Trinity arose out of early Christian reflection on scripture and their experience with Jesus and the Holy Spirit. For them, encountering Jesus was somehow encountering God directly — and at the same time, Jesus spoke of God as both distinct from him (as when he prayed to God, or spoke of God as the One who sent him) and yet nevertheless "one" with him. There was in some way both a "two-ness" and a "oneness" in play, and so Christians sought out ways to express this mystery with poetry and precision. Likewise, the earliest disciples experienced encounters with the Spirit as encounters with God directly — and at the same time, Jesus spoke of the Spirit as a guiding, challenging presence distinct both from him and from the One to whom he prayed. And so arose, over time, the church's doctrine of the Trinity, the idea that God is properly conceived as both Three and One. Not three Gods — for that would miss God's oneness. And not merely One — for that would miss God's threeness...

Still, even with helpful explanations, it seems that the Trinity is inherently something we can't fully comprehend, even while we profess that God is three in one and one in three. There were multiple, days long church councils early on trying to get to that full comprehension. One writer even calls the trinity baffling, and says that some understand the Trinity to be "to be too vague, esoteric, or downright weird to be of much use in their daily lives." But going back to that thrill seeker within me, it seems that awe, fascination, maybe a bit of terror, and a lot of mystery are what the Trinity should bring forth within us. Which we can witness in Isaiah's response to God.

First, Isaiah doesn't run away. He acknowledges his amazement, probably even his confusion, that he, a man who has sinned, who isn't perfect, has seen God and lived, which is, Biblically speaking, truly an oddity at this point. I mean, Isaiah could freak out, he could ask questions, but instead he names what is happening, even if not understanding it. The seraph brings the coal to his lips, and tells him that his sin has been blotted out. And then, in response to God's question, he says, I want in on this, here I am, send me on your behalf, and based on what God sends Isaiah

to do, I'm pretty sure Isaiah may not have known what he was volunteering for. You can only imagine he was fed by what he was witnessing before him.

Some note that this happens in Isaiah 6, a bit of a weird spot for a call story, and therefore see it more as a renewal of call, or God sending Isaiah on a new project. Maybe being in the God's powerful presence renews Isaiah, and prepares him for the journey ahead, maybe the renewal of call and being in God's overwhelming presence go hand in hand.

Like the waves, anyone who has been to Niagara Falls or another large, powerful, waterfall may know what it's liked to be held by the power you see before you. You don't want to be fully immersed in it, for that seems potentially fatal, but want to get closer, to feel the mist on your face and hear the roar, maybe even to see the backside of water (which while a really corny joke – it's worth noting that in another text God allowed Moses to see where God's glory had passed, or God's backside). I think of all that water is too, how it shapes the landscape with its might, and yet makes up so much of our bodies and sustains all of life. The same is true of God, Jesus even says he offers us living water. God is like the powerful waterfall that holds and draws us but could definitely overpower us, but is also in our very bodies, and sustains us with every breath.

One of the things I love about God is that we are invited to bring all of ourselves, including all of our questions, our amazement, our sorrow and our joy to our faith. I remember several years ago having a student whose friend had told her eventually she had to stop asking questions and just believe, but that's not true to who we are. We can ask our questions and believe, in fact, since many of our questions may never be answered, faith is about bringing both together. And we can simultaneously not fully understand and ask questions about the Trinity and profess it as true, while being called and sent out by the triune God.

We may not be able to fully grasp God, but we can experience God, we can have a relationship with God, and the Trinity is of use in our daily lives. The blending of earth and heaven in what Isaiah saw is the blending of earth and heaven that the Trinity offers us, and assurance that God is not up there, far away from us, but is present with us. As the Salt Blog puts it, "the [Trinity's] quite practical upshot is to cast a vision of God "down here and everywhere," creating, redeeming, and sustaining creation at every turn, with every unfurling leaf and blossom. In short, the doctrine is ultimately about a world saturated with divine presence, and a God "in whom we live, and move, and have our being... who is, redeeming and sending us, guiding and empowering us." In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.