



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

The God Who Is

Isaiah 6:1-8 & St. John 3:1-17

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Five hundred years ago, John Calvin famously wrote in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, that the human mind is a perpetual forge of idols. Our minds, he writes, are stuffed with presumptuous rashness and so we forget the God who is and create gods suited to our fallenness. We ignore the God who has revealed himself in the Scriptures. We ignore the God who has revealed himself in Jesus. And instead we imagine gods for ourselves that affirm us in our particular sins and failures, that affirm the heresies and false ideologies we hold to, and that, on the other hand, stand against everything we don't like. Have you ever had one of those conversations where someone interrupted and said, "Well, *my* god isn't like that" or "Well, *my* god would never condemn such-and-such."

We reject the God who is, the one who revealed himself to Moses as "I am", and we reconstruct God in our own image. This deity we call "*My* god" never challenges us. He—or it—gives us whatever we want. It doesn't embarrass us with its demands. It affirms us as we are. It boosts our ego. In our Old Testament lesson this morning we read about Isaiah's encounter with the Lord and how he could only respond by falling on his face and declaring not only his own unworthiness, but the unworthiness of his people. "*My* god" never prompts that sort of reaction, because "*My* god" is home-made, a myth, and ultimately just a means to worship ourselves. "*My* god" rarely inspires us to feed the poor, let alone preach good news to them. "*My* god" doesn't inspire missionaries to sacrifice

everything to proclaim its gospel to the nations. "*My* god" typically affirms us in whatever we're doing—particularly if whatever we're doing isn't worship and service of the God who is I am.

And now, on Trinity Sunday every year, the Church confronts us with the living God, the God who is, the great I am. The Church reminds us that even though we spurned the God who is so that we could serve our idols and ourselves, he still desires us. Today we wrap up the first half of the Church Year. We began with Advent—anticipating this God's coming among us—and then at Christmas, his birth, his incarnation, his taking on our flesh and becoming God as one of us and God with us. We saw this Jewish Messiah revealed to the Gentiles at Epiphany, reminding us that the God of Israel is also the Lord of Creation. We walked with him through Lent and watched his ministry to the outsiders and outcast. We knelt below the Cross as he was crucified on Good Friday and then worshiped with joy on Easter, remembering that he has risen from grave, conquering sin and death. Two Sundays ago we celebrated his Ascension to his throne and last week we recalled that he has sent God's own Spirit to indwell his people, fulfilling the promise the Lord had made through the prophets, to renew the hearts of his people and to dwell in their midst.

This sequence, ever year, not only reminds us of the great story of redemption, but it also reminds us of the God who is and just who he is. He's not the god we imagine, but the God who comes in humility, the God who confronts the idols of his people, the God who gives his life for his enemies, the God who says, "Never think that you have chosen me; it is I who have chosen you."

And now, at the end of that sequence of Sundays recalling the God who is amongst us, the Church confronts us with this God as Trinity—with this God who is one in three and three in

one. It's complicated. It's not easy to grasp. Christians for two thousand years have tried to come up with analogies and they always fail. Why? Because there is nothing in Creation like God. He is the Creator and he is totally and entirely other. This isn't the God we humans would ever invent. As an avid reader of fantasy novels, I've run across plenty of authors who have developed their own mythologies and written into them some sort of god who manifests him- or herself in multiple ways or persons or forces. But none of these authors would have come up with these ideas if it weren't for the fact that there was an actual Trinity that provided the inspiration. The doctrine of the Trinity isn't something that the Church Fathers constructed at Nicaea as if it was a theological laboratory. There is certainly a sense in which the process involved something like doctrinal algebra as they sought out just the right language to describe who God is and at the same time making sure they were also very clear about who and what God is *not*. But they didn't construct the idea. They were, so to speak, solving for "x" and "x" was already there. They were simply working out how to express the divine equation in human language with all its limitations. No, the God who is, this three-in-one and one-in-three doesn't fit into our boxes. And so the Trinity calls us to walk in faith. This is the God who truly does reveal himself, but when he does, there's only so much of him we can comprehend. We fall on our faces in humility and in awe and in worship. And then he picks us up—or like Isaiah touches that holy coal to our lips and purifies us—and says, "I'm sending you. Follow me in faith." It's remarkable. We can only fathom his depths so far, but he knows us deeply, through and through. We want a god created in our image, a god we can know, a god who gives us what we want, but the God who is, is beyond our full knowing, but still calls us to bear his image, and gives to us not what we want, but what he knows we

need—even when it hurts like a coal on the lips.

But why does it matter what we believe about God? Why do we have, for example, the pages-long Athanasian Creed spelling out the Trinity and the Incarnation in details that seems so unnecessary to so many Christians? Why does it matter? And what difference is it going to make?

Brothers and Sisters, all we have to do is look at the world around us. Why can we find the funding for trillions of dollars to make war, while turning “peace” into a political dirty word? Friends, it’s because we’ve been worshipping Mars instead of the Prince of Peace. Why is pornography the most lucrative business on the Internet while poor people starve? It’s because we’ve been worshipping Aphrodite rather than the living God. Why are we so keen on converting everyone to political causes and parties, but can’t be bothered to proclaim the good news that Jesus is Lord? It’s because we’ve been worshipping Caesar rather than Jesus.

You see, what you believe about God is important. It makes a difference in how you relate to him and to the world around you. The problems is that so much of our misunderstanding and misbelief about God is part of the cultural water we swim in. We have to stop and think and ponder on these things sometimes—which is why the Church confronts us year in and year out. If we would only listen. But I think we can get a sense of the problem if we think about the way so many people in our culture think about God today. For most people he’s remote. He’s the “man upstairs” or he’s some kind of “great spirit”. People acknowledge that he had something to do with creating the cosmos, but he’s been pretty much hands-off ever since. Even our cultural understanding of redemption is essentially justification—not by *faith*—but by *death*. If God does judge it’s on rare occasions—only

when someone really evil like Hitler or a serial killer comes on the scene. But for the most part this god has left us to look after our own interests. And as good as this sounds to a lot of people, all you have to do is look at the chaos, the strife, the violence around us to see that we’re not doing a very good job of it.

But, you see, this is the god the Eighteenth Century Enlightenment thinkers wanted. This was the god they were talking about when they said “*My god*” is such and such. In their case “*My god*” was a divine clock-maker. And how they thought of this god had a profound effect on how they related to him and the world around them. This is the god who only demands—if he demands anything at all—that we worship him for an hour on Sunday mornings. The rest of Sunday, not to mention the rest of the week, we can do our own thing. And when this is what we think of God, even when we do go to church on Sundays, worship and ritual lose their meaning and the focus turns to self. It’s all about “me” anyway, so the focus of church should be on making sure I feel good about myself. That’s “*My god*”. He doesn’t confront our sin. He doesn’t confront our idols. He doesn’t require we change. And this is why world is such a mess.

The problem is that when we banish God to the far-away reaches of space, other gods will always fill the void. We worship Mars and Aphrodite. We worship Caesar and Mammon. We worship self. And we think we’re so smart and we build this world that we call civilisation. We think we’re so much more sophisticated than the primitive people who came before us and who had this idea of a God who dwelt in their midst. And yet this great civilisation we’ve built without God has brought us two world wars, nuclear bombs, Communism and Fascism, eugenics, a sexual revolution that has destroyed our families and culture, and a genocide of the unborn, the most innocent amongst us. This is

what we get when we worship “*My god*” instead of the God who is.

So what happens when we do acknowledge the God who is, this Trinity? If these doctrinal propositions are so important even though they often seem so finicky and esoteric, then affirming them—even celebrating them—must have some kind of positive working out, right?

First, Brothers and Sisters, doctrine *is* important. We live in an age when many people think it’s not. This is part of why so many people who call themselves Christians are perfectly happy talking about “*My god*” and then describing a god of their own making, not the God who is. We live in an anti-intellectual age, which doesn’t help either. We think that it’s not so much about what’s in the head, but what’s in the heart. As long as you’re sincere, that’s all that matters. But, Friends, it’s not. Do you remember—it was quite a few years ago—when I sat on a box here? It looked pretty solid, but what happened? It collapsed under me. If you were here, you’ll remember that it collapsed under me even faster than I anticipated it would! You see, it’s not our faith that saves. It’s the *object* of our faith. All the faith in the world that a cardboard box will support me won’t change the fact that it can’t. It’s the object, not the faith itself. This is why Jesus said that all we need is faith the size of a mustard seed. Our faith has no power of itself. The power lies with the God in whom we put our faith. All the faith you need is the faith that causes you to trust him, to rely on him, to ask him and then to trust in his good and perfect will. Faith is not our god. God is our God. And so we’d better be putting our faith not in “*My god*” but in the God who really is, in the Three-in-one and One-in-three.

But, too, remember that Christianity is not defined by race or sex or nationality or even by the things we do. Remember our study of Romans?

The Jews defined the people of God in terms of what they did. They were circumcised, they observed the Sabbath, they followed certain dietary rules. And Paul said that all that was fine and good, but that it wasn't what truly defines the people of God. What defines the people of God is faith in God himself and in his promises. It all comes back to God and so it's vitally important that we put our faith in and worship the one, true God. And this is why we recite the Creed together every time we gather to worship—to remember and to affirm that *this* is the God in whom we trust. Church history shows us over and over again that whenever we sideline doctrine and deny its importance we stray into heresy. At the root of every cult is some misunderstanding of the Trinity or the Incarnation. This is why the Fathers worked so hard to hammer out the creeds with such precise language. Without theology—"theology" comes from the Greek for "study of God"—without it, we will eventually forget the one, true God and fall into idolatry.

I think the second thing to remember is that the doctrine of the Trinity recalls the God who is as he revealed himself in the Old Testament. It's very common to hear people say that the Trinity is a Christian invention—not something Jewish at all. But this isn't true. The Jews believed in a God who was very much other, but who also had once lived in the midst of his people and, one day, would live in their midst again. He breathed his Spirit into various people at various times—people like King David and the Prophets and even the craftsmen who built the tabernacle—and he inspired them to speak and to act and to make beautiful things all with his authority. His word had been there in the beginning as the agent of Creation and his wisdom continued to guide his people. The Jews saw the God who is in all these things and in all these manifestations. The first Christians didn't reject all this in order to come up with something new called the

Trinity. They simply found these Jewish ideas coming into sharp clarity when they looked at the risen Messiah Jesus and when they saw God's Spirit indwelling his people. It's a tragedy that rather than resting mainly on the language and ideas of the Old Testament, the Fathers later used the language of Greek philosophy to define the Trinity, but the doctrine is there nevertheless in the New Testament itself. It's there when St. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:19 that "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself". It's there in our gospel as Jesus said to Nicodemus that that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. While the language used by the Fathers to define it came later, this doctrine is not some late addition to the faith or corruption of Judaism and the Old Testament. It's there through and through both the Old and New Testaments and sits at the core of our faith. This is the God who is. This is the object of our faith.

So where does this take us? If we've got this part right, what sort of worship should flow from it? What sort of people does it make us as we go out to our families and our workplaces and into the world? What priorities does it give us?

Brothers and Sisters, to affirm the doctrine of the Trinity is to affirm that the God who is, is a God of love and of mercy. Yes, he is distant and utterly other, but he has also drawn near in Jesus, taking our flesh on himself in humility. And why? Because he "so loved the world" as we read in our Gospel. The God who is has given himself—his very self—to reconcile his enemies to himself. In our Epistle from Revelation we get a glimpse into the heavenly throne room. God sits on his throne in all his majesty. He is the judge. He is the one whom we finally see in Revelation setting his Creation to rights, coming in wrath to wipe away every last bit of evil that has corrupted his Creation and then making all things new. The God who is judges, condemns,

destroys. And yet, if we were to flip two chapters ahead, we also see the Lamb at the centre of that heavenly worship—the Lamb who gave his life that his enemies might once again be his friends. The God who is will judge the earth—and if you really think about it, that's a frightening image for a sinner and idolater to behold—but he is also the God who loves his Creation and his creatures so much that he will one day set it all to rights and has given himself so that we can have a part in that new creation, rather than being destroyed on that day when he wipes it clean of sin and evil.

Brothers and Sisters, the doctrine of the Trinity declares to the world that the God who is, is both the judge to be feared *and* the saviour to be adored, who has entered into his own creation to share and to bear our pain himself for our sake.

The Trinity affirms that Jesus is one of the three persons of the Trinity, but it also affirms that the Spirit is one of them, too. The God who is has sent his Spirit to apply to his people the work done by his Son. To affirm the doctrine of the Trinity is to affirm that in Jesus, God came to bear our pain and our wrong and to set Creation to rights. It's also to affirm that God comes today in the Spirit to enliven his people and to send us into the midst of the pain and sin and brokenness of the world with the good news about Jesus and with renewed hearts ready and eager to bring the gospel of Jesus to bear on the pain and wickedness of the world. And so our affirmation of the God who is—not the god we might make in our image, but the one, true God who is—shapes who and what we are and how we serve and worship. He is the one who lies behind our prayers even as we reach out to him with those same prayers. He is the one who fills our hearts with gratitude and love for the mercy he has shown to us in Jesus and who makes us stewards of his grace for the sake of the world. He is the one who gives us a vision of creation

set to rights and who inspires hope as we stand at the empty tomb and look ahead to that future and then work for justice and peace and goodness, pulling God's future into the present that this world of idolaters might have a glimpse of the God who is.

So to affirm the Trinity is to look up to the God who is, but it's also to go out into the world in the name of the God who is Father, Son, and Spirit and to bear his image, restored to us by Jesus and the Spirit. We affirm the doctrine as we recite the sometimes strange-sounding words of the Creed, but maybe even more importantly, we affirm the God who is as we receive his invitation and come to his Table. Here we celebrate the life of the God who is, given in Jesus the Messiah, God with us, as we receive his gifts of bread and wine blessed and made holy by his Word and Spirit. Brothers and Sisters, the bread and wine remind us that we've not only been redeemed by the God who is and saved from our sin, but that we've also been given his life as he has filled us with his Spirit. Here we meet the God who is. And here the God who is reminds us that you are his temple and that I am his temple. And that means that we, his people, are now the place where this lost world meets the God who is.

Friends, we cannot come to the Lord's Table and be reminded of the love and compassion, the mercy and grace, and the life he has given to us through Jesus and the Spirit without then going from this place to make that same love and compassion, mercy and grace, the very life of God known to the world. We Anglicans don't very often use the word "Mass" to describe the Lord's Supper, but it's an apt word nevertheless. It comes from the Latin word for dismissal. Having met the God who is in word and sacrament, he now sends us out into the world as stewards of his grace. The world wants "My god". The world wants god in its image. But the God who is wants the world—wants to flood it with love and mercy and grace and

forgiveness and life—and you and I are his means of taking it to them.

Let us pray: Almighty and everlasting God, you have given us your servants grace, by the confession of a true faith, to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity and in the power of the divine majesty to worship the Unity: Keep us steadfast in this faith, we pray, not merely in our heads and not merely in our hearts, but also in our hands and our feet, our eyes and our ears that we might also be steadfast in making you known to the world as stewards of your grace. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns together with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.