

Imagine being in Isaiah's shoes. Out of nowhere – it seems – you're given a vision by God. And the vision isn't just from God, it is of God. Isaiah sees the Lord, sitting on His glorious throne, His royal robe filling the temple, the heavenly angels flying about Him. The praises of the angelic choirs are so great that they shake the very foundations of the place, and all the while smoke fills the air, no doubt incense offered up unto the Lord.

How would you respond to such a scene, to such glory and holiness and power before your very eyes? No doubt you'd respond like Isaiah, who cries out, "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!" Confronted by the absolute holiness of God, Isaiah becomes painfully, terrifyingly aware of His own sin, His unworthiness to stand before the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. His destruction is the only thing that could seem to follow; what else could happen to a sinner in the presence of the Holy One?

We read, "Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar." You know the rest of the story, but try to put it out of your mind for just a minute.

You're Isaiah; you're terrified; you know that you deserve to be destroyed. Suddenly one of the seraphim flies at you. This isn't some chubby little winged infant, or some emasculated porcelain figurine gently floating your way. No, "seraphim" means "burning ones." This is a creature that appears – maybe – similar to a human; it has hands, and wings, and speaks. But the distinguishing feature of a seraph is the fire, how he continually blazes with the holy fire of God.

Now this creature of fire is headed right at you, holding in his hand – in his bare hand – a flaming coal from the altar. That altar that burned up countless sacrificed creatures, this being engulfed in fire is now flying at you bringing more fire in his hand. What are you going to do? What can you do? Again, all this fire coming at you, surely this is the end. This must be the fire of judgment, coming to burn you – an impure creature – away from the purity of the Lord Most High.

But what happens? The angel reaches out to quivering Isaiah and touches his lips with the coal. Is he left with third degree burns? No. All the fire, strangely, doesn't leave any physical effects. It isn't until the seraph speaks that we know what happened. He tells Isaiah, "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." Somehow all this fire has not consumed Isaiah. It instead has purified him. This coal, or that which it represents, has burnt away the impurity of his guilt and sin.

Isaiah can now stand in the presence of the Holy One. His words are no longer exclamations of terror, but offers of service to the God who has cleansed him. Isaiah writes, "And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' Then I said, 'Here I am! Send me!'"

Does the Lord ever explain to Isaiah how the burning coal cleansed him, or why he commissioned the prophet in this particular way? No, He doesn't. He simply acts to cleanse and

commission Isaiah, and Isaiah responds in faith, living out the transformation that God has so graciously brought upon him.

This gets to a key theme of this particular Sunday, namely, who God is and how He works are far beyond our understanding. As St. Paul exclaims in Romans, “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!” Our response must not be to question them or doubt them, but to humbly receive them and give thanks for them, because what our Lord does is always for our good.

On Trinity Sunday, we hear of and rejoice in a key truth of the Christian faith: the Holy Trinity. God has revealed Himself to be one God in three Persons. Each Person – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – are unique Persons, distinct from the other Two while still being the One God.

The Father is the One who sends forth His Son. And this is not just any son. This is the only-begotten Son. This is the Son who shares in the very essence, the same substance as the Father. This is the Son who is closer to, who is more beloved, by His Father than any other son in the history of the universe.

The Father sends the Son to earth, to take on human flesh, to become part of the creation which He created, together with the Son and the Holy Spirit. Why does He do this? So that His Son may die. In this sending, the Father is giving the Son something He couldn’t pass on to Him, namely, mortality. The Father is light and life, undying and eternal, and so the Son who is begotten of Him is likewise light and life, undying and eternal.

But the Son must die, in order to be the sacrifice for the sins of the world. The Father must suffer pain and loss, giving up His perfect, innocent, dearly beloved Son for the sake of those who have rebelled against Him, who have pushed Him away and sought their own paths.

He knows each of these rebels perfectly. He knows their sin. Your sin. My sin. The sin of all. And because He is just and righteous and holy, such sin cannot exist in His presence. Sinners cannot stand in His presence. Isaiah wasn’t being dramatic; this is simply the reality of holiness and sin. The Father knows if He does nothing, all mankind from Adam and Eve on must be cast into the outer darkness, to the eternal weeping and gnashing of teeth, because that is what justice demands.

Yet while the Father is just, the Father is love. He loves humanity. He loves every single man, woman, and child who will exist throughout the ages, and He desires to have them dwell with Him for eternity. And so, in love, He gives us that which is most precious to Him – His beloved, only-begotten Son – to pay the price that justice demands.

The Son, who is also fully God, and therefore also love, willingly comes. He does not resent His Father, but rather perfectly obeys Him as His Son. And He comes of His own accord. As the Scriptures say, “Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

As true God, He knew perfectly the extent of the sin for which He would die. He knew the burden of spiritual filth that would be laid on His shoulders. He knew the agony of body and soul that would come to Him on that Friday outside Jerusalem.

Most incredibly, in love that goes far beyond our understanding, He even knew that many would reject His sacrifice, refuse to believe in Him, think of His death and resurrection as mere fables, and still He died for them. He was born of the Virgin, suffered, died, was buried, and rose again in order to grant life to all men, even to those who would reject that life and choose the path of death instead.

“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” So writes St. John in the first chapter of His Gospel. The Son came out of love for fallen humanity, in order to restore them to Himself. And not just to restore them as the most superior creations of God, but even to let them be children of God. The Son is not jealous, seeking to be the only Son of God for eternity. While He is and will eternally be the only-begotten Son of the Father, He delights in raising up men and women to be adopted sons and daughters of God, sharing with them all the glory and joy and peace of the Kingdom that belongs to Him and His Father.

How do we, creatures born captive to death, dead in sin, even enemies of God, become beloved children of God? This is the work of God the Holy Spirit! As we confess in the Small Catechism, “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.” You and I can’t believe on our own, so God the Holy Spirit comes and gives us the gift of faith.

This is what confused Nicodemus so much. He thinks that there must be something He does to come to faith, be that knowing the right teaching or doing the right thing. When Jesus says that he must be born again, born of water and the Spirit, this confounds Nicodemus. Not only is he thinking in physical terms – physically entering back into his mother’s womb – but he’s also looking at what he does.

But birth is not something a baby actively chooses to do; it’s something that happens to the baby. In fact, it would seem that it happens against what the baby would desire, crying as he leaves the nice, warm, cozy womb and being thrust out into the world of harsh light and cold air and being poked and prodded. So it is with our being born again. Our sinful flesh is comfortable in our sins. And the devil and the world are glad to keep us in them. But then along comes the Holy Spirit who causes us to be born into the Kingdom, thrust out of the darkness and into the realm of God’s light.

The Spirit does this through the Word and the Sacraments, giving to us the very forgiveness, life, and salvation won for us by the Son on the cross. As Jesus promised to the apostles, the Spirit would teach them all things and bring to their remembrance everything He taught them. The apostles and their close associates then wrote this down for us in what we call the New Testament. Combined with the Old Testament, which God the Holy Spirit caused to be written down through the prophets of old, we have the full word of God.

Through these writings – given and preserved by God Himself – God creates faith in the hearts of men. As we hear in Romans, “So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”

Likewise, the Holy Spirit works in Holy Baptism to create saving faith, even in the hearts of infants. At Pentecost, St. Peter declares that those who are baptized “shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.” As many as the Lord will call... the Lord who says, “Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it.” That’s pretty much the exact same thing Jesus tells Nicodemus: “Most assuredly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” Right before ascending, Jesus also plainly declares, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved.”

Now right away, we might ask “What about the thief on the cross? What about babies who die before they can be baptized? What about those who come to faith through hearing the word?” Scripture does answer these questions, at least in part. But remember, the point of faith is believing what you cannot see, trusting that God knows what is good and right when we do not.

The Christian’s response may be to ask “How will these things be?”, as the Virgin Mary asked of Gabriel. But whether or not God answers, or whether or not we are capable of understanding the answer, we finally answer with Mary, “Let it be to me according to your word.” Or as Christ confessed in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Not as I will, but as You will.”

Again, do we understand how all this works? Can we fully grasp how the undying God could die for His creation, that God and man can come together in one Person, that the death of God can bring about life for man, that water and the word creates faith in the hearts of children, even the tiniest of infants, that the infinite God can be found in finite bread and wine, that three distinct Persons can be found in the One Holy God? No! No, we can’t. It is beyond the capabilities of our finite, sin-corrupted reason to completely understand these things.

So then what do we do? What did Isaiah do? Did he run away from the flaming messenger, because he knew that fire hurts and that he deserved to die? Or did he reverently watch in awe as God worked in ways beyond his understanding to cleanse him from sin and then joyfully go out to proclaim God’s word?

We as God’s people are to respond as Isaiah did. We humbly receive God’s salvation as totally His work. We gladly hear, read, study, and keep God’s word, even when we don’t fully understand it. We receive Holy Baptism and Holy Communion as God’s miraculous workings and administer them according to His commands and not our wishes or feelings, because they are of God, not men. And with Isaiah, we go out into the world, shining the light of faith for all to see, knowing that Jesus Christ has taken away our guilt and atoned for our sin.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.