

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

**First Sunday after Pentecost:
Trinity Sunday**

Year B

RCL



Isaiah 6:1-8

Psalm 29

John 3:1-17

The Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, you have given to us your servants grace, by the confession of a true faith, to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and in the power of your divine Majesty to worship the Unity: Keep us steadfast in this faith and worship, and bring us at last to see you in your one and eternal glory, O Father; who with the Son and the Holy Spirit live and reign, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory."

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” 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!”

Psalm 29 Page 620, BCP

Afferte Domino

- 1 Ascribe to the LORD, you gods,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
- 2 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his Name;
worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.
- 3 The voice of the LORD is upon the waters;
the God of glory thunders;
the LORD is upon the mighty waters.
- 4 The voice of the LORD is a powerful voice;
the voice of the LORD is a voice of splendor.
- 5 The voice of the LORD breaks the cedar trees;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon;
- 6 He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
and Mount Hermon like a young wild ox.
- 7 The voice of the LORD splits the flames of fire;
the voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
- 8 The voice of the LORD makes the oak trees writhe
and strips the forests bare.
- 9 And in the temple of the LORD
all are crying, "Glory!"
- 10 The LORD sits enthroned above the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as King for evermore.
- 11 The LORD shall give strength to his people;
the LORD shall give his people the blessing of peace.

John 3:1-17

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished

that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in

the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

SERMON

With Pentecost past we move into the time of the Liturgical year which the church calls “The time after Pentecost”. The time after Pentecost is when we begin to understand what a big deal the gift of the Holy Spirit is. Today, we are given two interesting stories: the call of First Isaiah, and Nicodemus's visit to Jesus at night and, with them, a chance to think about pride and confession.

At first glance, it's hard to see a connection between these two stories. Isaiah reports a vision he experienced of frightening supernatural beings burning his lips with a hot coal. John relates a surreptitious visit to Jesus by a leader of the Pharisees. There doesn't seem to be any connection between these two stories. It takes a closer

look to see why they are paired on the first Sunday in the time after Pentecost.

You may have noticed that in our time together I often speak of in terms of those called to the name Christian. I spent most of my life thinking that a decision to become a Christian was something an individual did, for his own reasons - sort of like a decision to join the Kiwanis Club. Of course, since I grew up with a family of Jews I wound up thinking that Jews are born and Christians are made.

I no longer see becoming a Christian as something one does. I see it more as something God does. Jews are born and Christians are born, too. We spoke on Pentecost of “The Elect”. Augustine, Luther, and Calvin understood that God's gift of

grace was irresistible and that it healed the sinful will so that those who received the gift of grace would gratefully accept it. That makes more sense to me than it once did. It makes sense to me that God calls and specially strengthens those called to the name Christian because each Christian is called to a task. The more I read and consult my heart, the more I find I am drawn to the Presbyterian understanding of predestination - that God chose some from beyond all time to be called to the name Christian. Presbyterian obsession with bookkeeping still drives me crazy, but this idea I like.

Here's the thing. If I take it into my head that I have, on my own hook, chosen to follow Jesus and thereby won for myself life everlasting, that

must be because I am a righteous kind of guy. Those who haven't made this choice then logically must be unrighteous, at least compared to me. No surprise that I'm going to heaven and they're going to hell, huh?

On the other hand, if I decide that God who knows from everlasting to everlasting has chosen me for His own reasons and granted me faith to love Him with all my heart, and mind and strength and to truly love my neighbor as myself, I can keep before me the certainty that I am as broken as those to whom I reach out, and I cannot boast. Or, as I heard it put once, "We're all Bozos on this bus." That's an important thing to keep in mind. God is God. We are all Bozos on this bus.

This issue of pride in ourselves, a willful forgetting of our inner Bozo-nature, is at the heart of a great number of missteps that we make. First Isaiah tells us that he had his vision “in the year that King Uzziah died”. That would be 740 b.c.e. If we’re going to focus on pride, King Uzziah is a good start. He had a long reign – 52 years. His was a prosperous reign as well. Under King Uzziah, Judah was as prosperous as at any time since Solomon. He’s even listed as an ancestor of Jesus in Matthew’s genealogy.

If you’re doing pretty well, as most of us here are, there’s a tendency to take credit for it. Uzziah wasn’t immune. He looked over his prosperous kingdom, decided he must be a pretty righteous kind of guy to enjoy that sort of success, and pro-

moted himself to Priest. He walked over to Solomon's Temple and tried to offer incense. The difficulty with that is that he was the king, not a priest, and he had no business in that area of the Temple. He was stricken with leprosy as a result of his pride, and driven out of the Temple and away from his throne. II Chronicles tells us:

King Uzziah had leprosy until the day he died. He lived in a separate house –leprous, and banned from the temple of the Lord. Jotham his son had charge of the palace and governed the people of the land¹.

That's what makes the dating of this story to the last year of Uzziah's life so interesting. As Uzziah's time on earth is coming to an end, Isaiah is granted a vision of God himself and responds with a confession of unworthiness,

¹ 2 Chronicles 26:19-21

Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!

Uzziah looked at the goodness God had poured out on his land, and took it as a sign that God was rewarding him for his righteousness. Approaching the House of God with pride, Uzziah received a case of leprosy. Approaching God with a confession of his unworthiness Isaiah received cleansing for his sins, and an undertaking from God.

This principle doesn't just apply to long-dead Uzziah. How many times have you heard someone say that our land is blessed with such riches because God thinks America is righteous? How would you like a case of leprosy? When God has selected someone, He doesn't reward them with riches. He touches their lips with a coal and charges

them with a task! How can you undertake the task God has selected for you from before all time if you insist on bringing Uzziah's pride along with you? How can you truly reach out to the suffering of mankind if in your mind you insist on thinking of yourself as righteous and blessed because of your righteousness? Will you not then see your neighbor as unrighteous because he suffers? Between unequals there can never be charity – only condescension. It's only by owning your own brokenness that you can acknowledge God as the source of the good you may do.

This is not an easy thing to get your mind wrapped around. Nicodemus, coming to Jesus in secret, was a Pharisee. Most people in church today think of Pharisees as the people who gave Je-

sus trouble, but that's unfair to the Pharisees. They were the ones who were particular about obeying the law of God. When the Scriptures related that God wanted His people to do something or not do something, the Pharisees were the ones that took Him exactly at His word, and set about doing or not doing just what God's Word told them to do.

Nicodemus was a leader of the Pharisees. He had a position. He was a man of influence, an important man in the community. His visit to Jesus at night tells us a lot about how he thought of himself. He didn't want anyone to catch him visiting this outlandish preacher from Galilee. He had his pride! When he greeted Jesus with these words, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher

who has come from God ...” he was trying to honor Jesus by granting Him the same dignity as he held for himself.

Jesus was having none of it. He replied “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” It doesn’t matter how much of a hotshot you fancy yourself to be. It doesn’t matter your position in your community. It doesn’t matter how smart you are, or how hard you work, or how tightly you bind yourself to the law of God, for the Pharisees certainly did that. Without the assistance of heaven, you cannot go about the task God selected for you from before all time.

This baffled Nicodemus. It continues to baffle people today. Any time you hear someone speak-

ing of America as blessed because its people are Godly, you hear Uzziah and Nicodemus speaking. However often we repeat it, it still bears repeating: we are not good enough, and cannot be good enough, to win God's favor over His other children. Without the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we'll mess it up. No matter how hard we try by our own efforts, Charlton Heston is still going to ride up that beach, see the ruins of the Statue of Liberty and fall to his knees crying, "They messed it up!"

So, here we are in the time after Pentecost. It's the time of the year when we can think on how to live lives animated by the Holy Spirit. At that first Pentecost, with the wonders of the Holy Spirit displayed before them, some members of

the crowd still did not see it and said the Apostles were drunk with new wine. That's the way it is with the ineffable, invisible hand of God - there is always ambiguity for those who seek it.

To look your fellow man in the eye and tell him or her that you are doing what you are doing in response to the Holy Spirit is tough. Just to suggest such an explanation makes me blush and become very uncomfortable. I know, as I was once reminded, that I'm not special. To claim the action of the Holy Spirit for anything I do makes me cringe. "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips..."

But to deny the work of the Holy Spirit in my life and in yours is many times worse. We are to

attend to the work of the Holy Spirit and if we are called to the name Christian and wish to wear it with integrity, we are to own it publicly. If we can't acknowledge the power of the Holy Spirit here, in God's own church, what are we doing here? In the time after Pentecost, we are to remember what happened then and to become aware of the movement of the Holy Spirit now. There is no way to do that without exposing yourself to the ridicule of those who saw the Apostles as drunks, but for those called to the name Christian there is no other alternative.

Uzziah brings us a powerful warning about pride, and Isaiah brings us a powerful lesson about confession. The gift of the Holy Spirit is not permission to get all holier-than-thou with God's

creation. The gift of the Holy Spirit means you are chosen to be servant to the world, not master of it. You are chosen to comfort those who suffer, to bind up the wounds of Creation, to bring water to those who thirst and food to those who hunger. Those who imagine that the gift of the Holy Spirit grants to them special privilege are like Uzziah, and like King Uzziah, they'll end their days bitter, sick and alone. Those who are horrified that the Holy Spirit would be revealed to one such as they, those who are aware of their own brokenness, and confess it, will inherit life.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

Mother Teresa famously reminded us:

At the end of our lives, we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received, how much money we have made or how many great things we have done. We will be judged by 'I was hungry and you gave me to eat. I was naked and you clothed me. I was homeless and you took me in.'

The path of a Christian is not one of power and influence. It is one of self-denying service for the good of all. Claim the action of the Holy Spirit in your life. Shout it to the heavens. Accept the ridicule that will follow and remind yourself that no one throws stones at a barren tree.

May the Love of God the Father
The Grace of God the Son
And the communion of God the Holy Spirit go and
abide with you this day and forever more.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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