

THE LIGHTS OF HOME

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Grace Church in New York
Trinity Sunday
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In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty. (Isaiah 6:1)

Today's Old Testament reading, in which Isaiah the prophet peers into the house of the Lord, evokes in me a vivid childhood memory. When I was about 10-years old my best friend lived just around the corner, so that our two backyards touched. One summer day he invited me to spend the night at his house with his family. The plan was for me to come over for supper and then sleep in the extra bed he had in his room. It would be the first time I spent the night away from my parents. It sounded like fun, and indeed it was. After supper we played all sorts of games, tormented my friend's little sister, and finally went to bed. When the lights went out we talked and told jokes into the night. Then, at the end of a long story I was telling, my friend made no reply. All I heard was the deep breathing of someone who had fallen soundly asleep – presumably right in the middle of my story. (Perhaps it was then that I realized my calling was to become a preacher of Trinity Sunday sermons!)

There I was, wide awake, unable to get to sleep, with nothing else to do but look out the window that was right next to my bed. What did I see? I looked across the darkness of our backyards and I saw nothing more, but certainly nothing less than the lights of home. There, from a perspective I'd never considered, was my own house – 36 Appleton Road, Glen Ridge, NJ, 07028 – that place in which I lived and moved and had my being. I could see my mother and father sitting and talking on the jalousie porch off the back of the house. At one point my mother got up and disappeared into another room, and then on the second floor I saw the light of my little brother's bedroom go on. It was late, he was supposed to be asleep, but he must have called to her in the night, so she came. My older brother's light was on, and I could see him pass his window every so often. I saw my father get up and go talk to him for a while. I remember lingering long at the window as my parents conversed with each other, moved about from room to room, and cared for the needs of my two brothers. On that first night away from home I was transfixed by the light and life that I knew so well, yet now stood apart from and gazed upon from afar.

Trinity Sunday is the day of the Church Year when we dare to gaze upon God. For Christians, to see the Lord begins with Jesus. For Christians to gaze upon God begins with gazing upon Jesus. The first followers of Jesus – both his disciples and those who experienced the power of his risen presence in the days after Easter – these people burned with the conviction that they had been granted a new and surprising perspective on the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The God in whom they lived and moved and had their being, the God they already knew from ages past came to them in a new way. They looked at Jesus and there in heaven a door stood open. The Lord of hosts who created the heavens and the earth, who called Israel to be his people, who spoke through the prophets, had now taken on flesh and smiled upon them with a human face. They saw the Lord.

So they knew God as Father and now as Son. But the experience didn't end there. After Jesus came the Day of Pentecost, when God's Holy Spirit filled them with such new life that they could only conclude that here was a third unique experience of and perspective on God. But which was God? Or were all three God? If all three were God, how could God be One, as Jesus, Moses, and the prophets had taught? For the early Christians, eventually the challenge came to be that of

harmonizing their experience of God. How can we articulate a rhyme and a reason to what we know of the God who reveals himself to us?

Enter the Doctrine of the Trinity and the Christian Creeds that describe what we see and experience when we gaze upon God. The Doctrine of the Trinity states that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God. And yet they are not three Gods, but One. The One God exists in Three Persons who are all of one Substance. It's right about now on Trinity Sunday every year when preachers begin to play the numbers game, and search for analogies of how three can be one, and one can be three all at once. It's also about right about now on Trinity Sunday when all we hear from the pews is the deep breathing of a congregation that has fallen soundly asleep! Perhaps we would have been better off if we'd just taken our cue from Jesus in today's reading from the Gospel of John (16:12-15). When he was trying to explain to the disciples something of his relationship with the Father and the Spirit, he apparently gave up and said, "*I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.*"

This year, I hope to avoid getting tangled up in the typical Trinitarian talk. I hope to avoid speaking of the Trinity as if God were a mathematical problem to be solved. Instead, my goal is to suggest a parable that is faithful to the Christian doctrine, but perhaps more immediate to the experience of gazing upon God that the doctrine tries to explain. The parable is simply this: to see the Lord is like looking into a house. It is to peer into the mystery of a family. The prophet Isaiah had such an experience that he described in today's Old Testament reading. Isaiah had a vision that took him into the inner sanctum of God – into God's very living room, if you like: *In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty.* St. John the Divine, the writer of Revelation (4:1-11), had a similar vision of being taken up into the dwelling place of God: *After this I looked and there in heaven a door stood open!* He saw the Lord.

It was while reflecting on these passages when I recalled the memory of seeing the lights of my own house on that first night of mine away from home. What did I see? The first thing I saw was light and life. Someone was home. If the Doctrine of the Trinity tells us anything at all, it teaches us to see light and life when considering God and the world God has made. Isaiah saw dazzling displays of life in his vision of God's house. *Seraphs were in attendance; 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."* Likewise John saw light in the form of lightning, and more life than he could take in or comprehend: twenty-four elders around the throne and four living creatures: one like a lion, one like an ox, one with the face of human, and one like a flying eagle. The verbal descriptions of Isaiah and John are as dizzying as the Trinitarian language of the Church Fathers is dense. Nevertheless, they all mean to convey a living Mind within, behind, before, beside, beneath, and beyond the creation. All things visible and invisible have a Creator who willed them into being. The Trinity tells us that someone is home, whom we know as God. Light and life is what I saw when looking at my house.

What else did I see? I saw love at work inside. I saw my parents talking with each other, my mother going to my little brother, my father visiting my older brother. They were never content to leave us alone with our troubles, but were always coming to us, talking with us, intervening in our squabbles, offering physical help, support, discipline, and forgiveness. In Isaiah's vision he cried out that he wasn't worthy to behold the Lord. But one of the seraphs flew to him, holding a live coal that he touched to the prophet's lips, thus purging away his guilt. The scene is a graphic – perhaps too graphic. I think I might have chosen having my unworthy mouth washed out with soap over the live coal touching my lips. But the point of cleansing and forgiveness is clear. The point is love. Out of love for Isaiah and the people to whom he would go, God took physical steps to make the prophet worthy to stand in his presence. So another experience of God the Trinity

tries to convey is the physical, human, sacramental means by which God shares his love with us. God comes to us, touches us, and physically handles the Creation. God is love in motion.

What else did I see? Finally, what I saw – not with my eyes but discerned with my heart – was my connection, my link, my bond with the house across the yard, and great gratitude for all that it was. I suppose I felt my first twinge of homesickness on that first night away. As I looked toward home, everything was exactly as it should have been, except for one thing: I wasn't there. But I knew that I belonged over there, more so than in the room where I was temporarily a guest. And I knew that I would return, no matter how long or how sleepless the night turned out to be. So the gratitude for belonging, the homesickness that would spend the night, and the joy of returning I anticipated in the morning were three personalities of one holy desire that lived in me and linked me to the lights of home. So also does the Doctrine of the Trinity try to articulate the magnetic bond of God that draws us home to himself, even into his Trinitarian life. So also does the Doctrine of the Trinity attempt to articulate the yearning we feel for God.

To see the Lord is like looking into a house. It is to peer into the mystery of a family. Lest you think the parable is meant for me alone, let me be clear that my aim is not to talk sentimentally about my childhood home. Rather, my intention is to speak about our eternal home – yours and mine. But you may object, saying that you and too many others never knew such a house. Your family didn't shine with any such glimmers of God's light and life. Love did not prevail, and rather than feeling any sort of homesickness, your suitcase was packed and you couldn't wait to get away, never to return. Even if such a home was yours, let me say especially to you that God can use the lack you experienced to draw you home to himself. The yearning for home has hardly been extinguished in you. One author put it this way: "*We feel, in some way, mysteriously incomplete, so all our life is a searching for a remembered unity we may never yet have known.*"¹ Did you catch the wonderful paradox of the phrase? We are searching for a unity, a home we remember, but a home we haven't yet known. So to gaze upon God is to be looking towards the lights of our true home, even to the Lord of hosts. By God's grace our earthly homes will reflect a glimmer of the splendor of God's temple. By God's grace this household of God – this family in Christ called Grace Church will provide a foretaste of the love that the saints in light forever enjoy in heaven.

John Donne, the great metaphysical poet of the 17th century and Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London wrote a prayer that seems especially appropriate for Trinity Sunday, as we gaze upon God and long for the lights of home:

Bring us, O Lord God, at our last awakening into the house and gate of heaven to enter into that gate and dwell in that house, where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light; no noise nor silence, but one equal music; no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession; no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity; in the habitation of thy glory and dominion, world without end. Amen.

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¹ Richard Holloway, Suffering, Sex and Other Paradoxes. Morehouse Barlow, 1984, p. 72.