

Trinity Sunday: John 3, Isaiah 6  
Church of the Good Shepherd  
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“It is not the task of Christianity to provide easy answers to every question, but to make us progressively aware of a mystery.”

Bp. Kallistos Ware

You’ve heard the story. He came to Jesus in the dark of night, this Nicodemus, likely because he didn’t want to be seen with a scandalous figure like Jesus. After all, the only thing we know about Nicodemus is that he was a respected “ruler of the synagogue,” a leader in the Jewish faith. How would it look for someone like him to be seen seated at the feet of a rabble-rouser like Jesus?

“Jesus, we know you are a prophet,” Nicodemus begins. “We know nobody could do what you do unless God was with him. We know...” Nicodemus is big on knowing. That’s what keeps powerful, prestigious people in power, after all. They’re “in the know.”

I ought to know because I’ve got several degrees to certify that I’m “in the know,” and I’ve been put in a position of being “in the know” (ordination) so that I could let you “know” what I know (preaching). And I know enough to know that many of you are here this morning in church because you like being “in the know,” too. Oh, some churches think so little of themselves that they’ve got themselves a preacher who got his degree for \$25 from some online, fly-by-night bogus seminary. Not you. You know enough and think enough of yourself to get yourself a preacher like me who is “in the know.” And because I know, you can too.

"Jesus, we know..." But Jesus cuts off Nicodemus’ intellectual preening midsentence. “You’ve got to be *hymas gēnnēthenai anōthen*” (did I mention that I know Greek?), “Powerful, prestigious, knowledgeable old man, you’ve got to be born from above!” With that, Nicodemus, self-confident, certified and certain, is knocked off his knowing perch: “How can an old man like me reenter his mama’s womb, and be born again?” Jesus replies, “The *pneuma* blows where it will. You can hear it, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it goes.” Nicodemus is even more flummoxed: “What do you mean, Jesus? Tell me, do you mean *pneuma* as in wind or as in Spirit?” Jesus replies, “How is it possible for somebody as smart as you to be so dumb? Nobody has ever seen heaven, except the Son of Man...Moses lifted up a snake in the wilderness...Be saved...Believe...Eternal life!” With that, knowing, knowledgeable Nicodemus is reduced to nothing, to dumb silence. He came to Jesus at night but, after their conversation, he’s still “in the dark.”

To be fair, I don’t think Nicodemus had a chance. I mean, it’s not just that Jesus knows more than Nicodemus—that’s assumed. I mean that the point of the conversation wasn’t to help Nicodemus to understand the ways of God, but instead to confuse him. Scholars of Greek (remember I know Greek?) are quick to tell us that Jesus is playing with double-entendres here—using words that have two different meanings: born again and born from above, wind and Spirit. And he answers Nicodemus’ questions with non sequiturs. The point, it seems, is to intentionally talk above his head, to keep the answers to his questions forever out of reach.

That may seem a strange thing for Jesus to want to do. But, it's not the first time God tasked someone with sowing stupidity. God told the prophet Isaiah to "make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed." Sometimes, it seems, our not-knowing is the point.

But why in the world would God want us to not understand him? I'll be honest, I don't know. But what I do know, or at least I accept, is that one of the consequences of this not-knowing is it reminds us of our distance from God. God's ways are not our ways, his thoughts not our thoughts, Isaiah says elsewhere. I (and perhaps you too) may think we are "in the know," that we've got a handle on God. But God remains forever beyond our grasp. All our images of God are inadequate; all of our words are too weak. God is utterly beyond us.

This fact is vividly portrayed in our first reading. A young Isaiah is at worship in the Temple when he receives a revelation, a vision. The curtain between heaven and earth is pulled back and Isaiah sees "the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple." He is flanked by the six-winged seraphim, those angels of fire who cover themselves because God's glory is too intense for them. These seraphim call out to each other: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"

This sight, so otherworldly, is enough to shake a person to his core. Earlier visions of God's glory made people think that they would die. And this one about did Isaiah in. "I am lost," he exclaims, "I am undone." In the presence of God, Isaiah is overwhelmed with fear—not fear that God would hurt him, but fear that comes when we are suddenly aware of our smallness and insignificance next to so immense a reality as God. Stand beside the Grand Canyon, count the stars in a clear night sky, set out to sea in a storm, witness the power of a hurricane or tsunami, and you get a sense of this terrifying feeling, an awareness of our nothingness before God.

The seraphim name the reason for this feeling: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord." The Lord God is holy. Before he is good, before he is giving, before he is powerful, God is holy. And not just holy, but thrice holy. What this means is God is not just better, wiser, bigger, smarter than us and anything else in creation; God is in a whole different category. Indeed, he doesn't even have a category, for nothing is like him. He is awesome, wonderful, mighty, and terrifyingly other.

Before such awesome holiness, we can only confess our unworthiness. "I am a man of unclean lips," Isaiah says, "and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." God is so good, so pure, so glorious that to be in his presence is to be devastatingly reminded of our own falseness, our sinfulness, and our shame. Even the heavenly beings, the angels, you'll remember, cover their faces, so radiant and pure and piercing is God's glory.

Now, I realize, in talking about God this way, I risk losing a lot of you. As much as you and I know, or think we know, fact is, there's nothing in our day-to-day experience, no earthly reference points to help explain God's holiness. It's like trying to describe what it is like to live on the sun or how one moves in the sixth dimension. It's beyond our understanding. God is holy, wholly other, utterly beyond us, terrifying and awesome in his glory.

It's true, we *used* to know what this meant. With the ancient Israelites, we respected the terrifying mysteriousness of God, we knew to honor the sacred and we feared to trespass on holy ground, to blaspheme God and God's things. This was more than superstition; it was an appreciation of a reality, a profound truth about God: namely, that there is such a thing as transcends us and demands our reverence and respect. But the plain fact is that we've lost that sense of awe, of respect, of fear. Nothing is sacred anymore.

And we can't blame atheists, either. We have done it ourselves. Harold Bloom in his book *The American Religion* says that Christians in America have made only one distinctive contribution to theology. The Church, he says, has always held that we have a need to be with God, that we ought to spend our lives on this earth attempting to know God, learning to obey Him, and live in accord with God's laws. Then along came American Christianity which came up with the notion that, as much as we long for God, God has an even greater desire to be with us. God is utterly pleased with us and is just dying to pal around with us. This is the "God is my copilot," "Buddy Christ," "Jesus is my homeboy" kind of religion. The problem is that as God has become so approachable, we've lost any sense of God's transcendence, God's distance and otherness, God's holiness.

You can see this reflected in the buildings contemporary churches meet in today. Their sanctuaries are basically carpeted living rooms, with wide screens and reclining chairs; or else auditoriums where they come to hear a preacher give a talk and a choir perform. On Sunday morning, there is so much smiling, and so much light, so much happiness, so much celebration of God's love for us that there is no room left for awe, for reverence. You wonder, where would they go to experience transcendence? Where might they be confronted by something, someone so wonderfully large and other that all they can do is to fall to their knees shouting, "Holy! Holy! Holy!"?

Annie Dillard, in her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, shows how silly this is, our domestication of the divine:

Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.

This is the power that we invoke when we name God as Trinity. I know a lot of us think of the Trinity as an unhelpfully complicated and abstract idea that some academics came up with long ago to show they are "in the know." But the reality is quite the opposite. The Trinity is in fact a refusal to confine God to our understanding, to reduce him to our imaginations and our expectations. By insisting on the inexplicable belief that God is one in three Persons, the Trinity proclaims God's inexplicability, establishes that God is forever a mystery.

Now, when I say God is a mystery, I don't mean that God is unknowable, that God is veiled in darkness in which we can only grope and guess. Rather, God is a mystery in that he is incomprehensible. We literally can't get our minds around Him. We try to pin God down, but God always recedes. We *can* know God, sure, as He has made himself known—through revelation, through miracles, in his creation, and finally, definitively in Jesus—but we will never know all there is of God. Thousands of books have been written by theologians probing the endless reaches of this mystery. But there is always more to God. God is beyond understanding, undefinable, incomprehensible, inexhaustible.

Now, most of us would readily acknowledge this—"yeah, God is a mystery." But if we're honest, we don't much like it. We aren't used to not being able to explain things. We like being "in the know." And, as Christians, we assume—and others assume it of us—that we are the "God-experts," able to say where God is and is not and to summon God when we need to. But when asked to account for God, we feel pressure to reduce him to fit people's priorities and expectations, to make God out to be reasonable, useful, and relevant.

The Trinity prevents us from treating God like this, from using him, as a commodity to trade, a truth that we bring out to explain or prove the unexplainable. With the Trinity, we are confronted with an immensity, a vastness, a depth that we cannot fathom or manage or reduce to dealing with on our own terms, but only on the terms of who God is in himself, as he has revealed himself.

And the way God has revealed himself is *not* as an idea to be explained, but as a mystery to be open to. God is not so much the object of our knowledge, as the cause of our wonder, not *something* we can hope to master, but *someone* who must be approached through a posture of worship, adoring what we cannot wholly understand, receiving that for which we have yet no name. To worship this God, to name God as Trinity, is thus to enter into relationship with God, who is essentially holy and wholly other, but who makes himself known to us personally and, more than that, who invites us to share in his life. To share in God's life, to live each moment present to the mystery of God—this is the task, and the promise, of the Christian life. Thanks be to God!