

Pastor T.C. Arnold
Trinity Sunday
Isaiah 6:1-7
May 30th, 2010

On a cold winter's day, a warm fire is quite inviting. On a sweltering day in the summer, any kind of fire would be avoided. Fire is very useful and needed when refining or molding products. Fire is very destructive when it gets out of control and is used carelessly. Fire can be fascinating. Fire can be terrifying. Either way, fire translates mass into energy. And so it is with the Holiness of God. Our God is an all consuming fire. Sometimes he is greeted with joy and great anticipation and other times he is greatly feared.

For example, consider the burning bush in Exodus chapter three. Moses was not scared of the bush that was on fire but was not burned up. He was rather intrigued and moved closer to see what was going on. The Lord appeared to Moses in this way. The Israelites were not scared of God when they were led by a pillar of fire by night through the desert. Israel might have been scared by the glory of God that shone from the face of Moses when he came down from Mt. Sinai. But that really wasn't fire – but it was light and glory which the people feared. We are told that the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mount (Sinai). We are told that those who do not believe will be cast into unquenchable fire. But we are also told that the Holy Spirit will baptize us with water and with fire. That doesn't sound bad – in fact it isn't bad. It's good. Fire, you see, can be positive and negative in the Bible. It's used 549 times (KJV translation) in the Bible.

There is a lot to be said about fire in the Old Testament text for today – even though the word, “fire” doesn't occur. We hear about these “six-winged” angels called seraphs with which they were covering their face, feet and flying. What's interesting about this vision of Isaiah is that these angels, which are not mentioned this way anywhere else in the Bible, were not what you might think of when it comes to heavenly messengers. The secret is in the word, “seraph.” This word is a Hebrew word when used as verb means, “to burn.” That's right, these angels were “burning” angels. They were on fire. That could either be intriguing and fascinating, or it could be absolutely terrifying.

There's more to be said about fire. Fire, of course, was used for burnt offerings in the Old Testament. These burnt offerings were pleasing to the Lord and the people of Israel would make these offerings regularly. They would often burn a sacrifice to the Lord – a lamb or a goat. A part of the burnt offering – the fire – was the “coal”. The coal that was used to touch the lips of Isaiah was a burning coal. It was taken with tongs from the altar. (I think it's interesting that these burning creatures called seraphs need “tongs” to pick up a burning coal.) The touching of Isaiah's lips was for purification. The Lord called him as He purified Isaiah. Remember, fire can be terrifying but it can also purify and cleans. His guilt is taken away. And there is something else – His lips will now speak words that are pure and holy. They will speak the Word of God.

On Pentecost, God's people were led to speak in different languages prompted by the Holy Spirit in tongues of fire. This fire may have been frightening but it was also purifying. The pure Word of the Lord was now heard in their own languages so they might come to the knowledge of life and salvation through faith. This reading that we hear on Trinity Sunday could go very well with last Sunday. It is because we take the church-year as a unit does one Sunday flow so well into the other. Trinity Sunday and Pentecost do go very well together. The fire, the

purifying to speak the true Word, and the speaking out to the nations all go together. The truth today – that our God is three persons in ONE God – is understood at the pure (purified), unadulterated truth. “*Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty, the whole earth is full of his glory,*” say the seraphim.

Like Moses and Gideon, Isaiah was frightened because he knew that no one could see God and life. In the presence of the Holy One of Israel, Isaiah was instantly aware of how sinful he was. He was impure in a place that required perfect purity (from TLSB, CPH, St. Louis, pg. 1099). Some people think of this place as a place that requires perfect purity. “I have to get my house in order first before I come to the Lord’s house,” I have heard said many times. Our sinfulness sometimes stands in the way of us approaching God. We think we need to be clean first. We think WE can make ourselves clean and living a better life – and then we will be ready to come to church on Sunday morning. Nothing could be more backward.

This is the place to gather – for sinners like you and me – to receive the forgiveness of sins and the purification that comes by way of the healing Word. This is the place for us sinners – no matter what our sin or how sinful we are – to be because, like Isaiah, we don’t deserve to stand in the presence of God – but He has made us deserving by looking at our stained life through the blood of His Son. Jesus purifies our lives. He cleanses us from our sins. Like fire, this could seem frightening or terrifying. However, like fire, there are many needed aspects of the energy and power we need. We can’t do without the fire of Christ’s forgiveness. We can’t do without our Lord placing burning coals on our lips.

“Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty...” The Holy Father, the Holy Son, and the Holy Spirit is our God. Not three Gods but three persons in one God. As we confess this in the Athanasian Creed we make no mistake about it. We say it over and over again. The seraphim call out to you and me today the very same refrain. The seraphim touch our lips so that we can speak the truth in love to our neighbor and community. It is true, the Holy Trinity gathers you here to hear and receive His precious gifts. Take them with you. They are yours. Share them and live them – in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.