

Jesu Juva

“An Incomprehensible Truth”

Text: Isaiah 6:1-8; Acts 2:14a, 22-36; John 3:1-17

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we celebrate a mystery. The mystery of the Holy Trinity. That the only God, the one true God, is three persons but only one God, one essence, and that this one essence is three distinct persons - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each 100% God, and yet there are not three gods, but one God. A mystery. A mystery we try to verbalize in the words of the Athanasian Creed, which we'll soon speak. But though we verbalize it, speak it, we cannot explain it. It is a mystery. Beyond our ability to comprehend or understand. Too large for our small minds to wrap around, too holy for our sinful minds to grasp. We can simply speak the truth as the One who is truth has revealed it - and Himself - to us. This is who God is.

And so one of the essential and foundational truths of Christianity we cannot explain - we can only confess. This is the truth. That has led some to mock us. How can you believe in a God you cannot even really explain? But perhaps the question really should be: *How can anyone believe in a god they can?* For if we could fully understand and explain God, figure Him out and contain Him in our minds, that would make us greater than God and, in fact, make us god. That's what Satan wants and so mocks the idea of the Trinity and the mystery. That's what our sinful natures want as well, not content to humbly rest in the mystery, but to master it; to master God and put Him in our debt and so turn everything upside-down. For that's what sin does - it makes good evil and evil good; it makes the truth a lie and lies the truth; it makes man his own god, master of his own destiny and shaper of his own fate. And then most to be pitied. For you are a dying god and one whose kingdom is falling apart and does not last. You are a god who cannot even save yourself.

So today we confess the truth - that God is (to use some of the words of the creed) uncreated, infinite, eternal, almighty, incomprehensible, holy. Everything we are not, He is. All that we have is from Him, and all that we have He does not need. And so we are here in the presence of this great and awesome God not to give but to receive; not to do but to rest; not to get answers and information but to worship. For the true worship of God is not primarily an intellectual or moral exercise, a thinking or doing - it is to receive life from Him in the forgiveness of our sins. For when you have forgiveness you have life, whether you live or die.

And our model of that today is Isaiah. Isaiah got it exactly right. In the presence of this almighty, infinite, incomprehensible God, he was toast. And he knew it. He was unclean.

And not just his lips, but *all* of him. His heart, his mind, his eyes - all unholy and corrupted by sin. And therefore his coming into the presence of a holy God was like gasoline coming into the presence of fire. And so he is undone and filled with fear. ***Woe is me***, he cries out. I am dead.

Yet something most wonderful happens. He does not die. There is something Isaiah has not taken into account. There is an altar. An altar for sacrifice. And when something from that altar touches his uncleanness, he is not toasted! Rather, his ***guilt is taken away*** and his ***sin atoned for***. Or in other words, he is made clean; he is made holy; he is forgiven. He is ***born again***, raised from the death of his sin to a new life. Nothing he did. He just died, so to speak. It's what God did. And with that his dread and fear are gone, replaced by faith and hope and confidence. So that when ***the voice of the Lord*** then says, "***Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?***" - us: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - Isaiah hesitates not one moment! ***Here am I***, your child. ***Here am I***, the one you have made alive and rescued from death. ***Here am I! Send me.***

It is what happens here and wherever God gives His gifts. You, lost and condemned sinners, are made alive and rescued from death. You cry out "***Woe is me!***" in confession and death, and the Lord answers with forgiveness and life. You are ***born again*** and raised when the sacrifice of God from the altar of the cross - the Father's own Son! - touches you and ***your guilt is taken away*** and ***your sin atoned for***. The uncleanness of your lips and hands and minds and hearts made clean when the water from the sacrifice touches your head, when the word of the sacrifice touches your ears and heart, when the body and blood of the sacrifice touches your lips. And you are made new. A gift just as incomprehensible, powerful, infinite, and eternal as the God who gives it - and keeps giving it - to you.

And with this gift the Lord is now sending you. But where? This too may be incomprehensible. It may not be where you think and not where you want, but where He needs. Maybe He will send you into suffering, or to suffer with a loved one. Maybe you will be sent into grief or hardship, into pain or sadness. Maybe into joy, maybe into the unknown. But wherever or however it is, you are not alone and never will be. For the God who sends you is with you. The Father, who gave His Son for you and gives His Spirit to you, won't stop giving what you need . . . including Himself. And maybe that will be through others who He sends to be with you. That, too, is often incomprehensible, isn't it? How God brings Himself and others into our lives and gives His good to us.

But most incomprehensible of all is how this awesome, holy, infinite, almighty, eternal God became small - became a man. That too is in the Athanasian Creed. That the Son of God in person, but all of God in essence, became man in the one single fertilized egg of His mother Mary, and was born and grew for us. How can the God who created all things become a creature? How can the God who feeds all creation Himself need to be fed? How can the all-powerful God become weak and lowly? Yet this too we confess. And

His death on the cross in our place - not because He *couldn't* save Himself (like us), but because He *wouldn't* - to provide the atonement, the forgiveness, we need and cannot live without. That dying and rising, we who are dead might rise too, with Him, to this new life. That's the truth Peter was preaching on Pentecost, when the Lord sent him after raising him from the death of his denials.

And that's what Jesus was trying to teach Nicodemus, who seems to me like a very modern man. He wants to learn and get things figured out. He wants to wrap his mind around God and the things of God, like so many today. But he can't. Jesus is telling him incomprehensible mysteries. About God and what God is doing; about being born again and born from above. Nicodemus wants to be in the classroom, but before Jesus he is in church. Jesus has come to give him what he needs - not understanding, *but Himself*.

Nicodemus doesn't get it . . . not at first. That he needed to be like Isaiah. But it seems like he did later, being one of the two men who cared for Jesus after He died, taking His body down and laying it in the tomb. Maybe it was that very day that connected the dots for Nicodemus, when the sacrifice from the altar touched him and raised him, when he saw Jesus on the cross and remembered those words spoken to him a few years before in the darkness of night: ***And 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.*** And his ***guilt was taken away*** and his ***sin atoned for***.

So whether it is Isaiah, Nicodemus, Peter, or you, the story is the same. Our incomprehensible God does incomprehensible things. His love, His forgiveness, His life, His incarnation, His death and resurrection, His Spirit, Word, and Sacraments now in all the world - we might ask today with Nicodemus: ***How can these things be?*** And even if we cannot explain it, we confess it. This is the truth. That ***God*** [the Father] ***so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him*** [through the working of the Spirit] ***should not perish but*** [be born again, born anew, and] ***have eternal life***. And so we worship - we come and receive forgiveness and life from - this God and no other. For there is no other.

*Blessed be the Holy Trinity and the undivided Unity.*

*Let us give glory to him because he has shown his mercy to us* (Introit Antiphon).

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.