

*“Moving the Comma”*

A Sermon by Angie Witmer based on Isaiah 6:1-8  
Sunday, June 7, 2009 Plymouth Congregational UCC

One more week. Just one more week. Then we'll be settling into the regular rhythm of Ordinary Time—the season of the church year that runs through the summer, into fall and takes us all the way to Advent (the four weeks before Christmas). There's nothing really special about Ordinary Time. No major holidays. No big celebrations in the life of the church. It's just, well, ordinary time. Hence the name.

I'm looking forward to it. Ordinary time is a nice breather after the intensity of the Lenten season and the joyful “Alleluias!” of the Easter season and the hoopla and festivities surrounding Pentecost (which we celebrated just last week). Ordinary time is a reminder that we are called to worship God all the time—on the big, splashy, “it's great to be alive” kinds of days and on the dark, depressing, “I can't bear to drag myself out of bed because life just hurts too much kinds of days” and on every other kind of day that falls somewhere between those two extremes. Every day. Or every night. In every home. It's a good thing.

But before we step into the ritual and routine of Ordinary Time, we have one more day of celebration today: Trinity Sunday.

Woo-hoo!

OK, I admit it. That was a forced “woo-hoo”. It's not that I don't think that the Trinity is important. I do. Actually, I think it's good for everybody to haul out the mystery of God as “three in one” every once in awhile (at least once a year) if for no other reason than to serve as a reminder that, try as we may, we just can't stuff God into a nice, neat little box or mold God into the image of what we think God should be. It doesn't work that way.

It's just that every time I try to come up with a way to talk about the Trinity in a way that makes sense, I'm reminded that most explanations of God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer (or Father, Son, and Holy Ghost as I learned it 40 some odd years ago) are pretty dry and, honestly, just aren't that helpful.

So I'm feeling a little pressure here today to give you all a sermon that will help you wrap your head around the doctrine of the Trinity and do so without boring you to tears. Most pastors who have attempted this feat would say that I'm probably setting the bar a little high. They may be right. But I'm still going to give it a shot. Here goes:

Over here, we have God as “all that”: powerful, a force to be reckoned with, the One who made all that is. Awesome. And by awesome, I mean ‘fall-to-your-knees-take-your-breath-away’ awesome. Huge. Mind-blowing. Bigger and better and more amazing than you can ever possibly imagine. There just aren't words that can capture God as Father or Creator—the first person of the Trinity. That's pretty cool.

But on the other hand, we know that God is one of us. The Son. The Christ. The guy at the dinner party, laughing and having a glass of wine and a good meal with friends and strangers alike. The one who isn't afraid to speak his mind, regardless of what other people might think. The one who does the right thing, regardless of what other people might do. The one who lives his whole life grounded in the great command to love God and love one another—and calls us and teaches us to do the same. The one who believed so much that this was and is the only way to live that he was willing to die for it...but he didn't let death get the last word. Jesus. The Second Person of the Trinity.

But wait—there's more. The Holy Spirit. The Holy Ghost in old-school vernacular. The one that blew through that upper room on Pentecost and lit people on fire to get out there and do something. The one that still blows in and through us today to transform and renew and sustain us in all times and all places. The breath of life. The Third Person of the Trinity.

And there you have it: God in three persons. All three unique. All three the same. All one. Holy, holy, holy.

How was that? OK. I know. It's just not that exciting. If anything, an explanation of the Trinity creates more questions than it provides answers—the biggest question being: “How can this be?”

Honestly, I don't know. They don't call it a mystery for nothing. To tell you the truth, though, I don't care. I don't care how this can be. I just care that it is. I don't care that we get the wording and the doctrine of God right. I care that we get to experience God. Because when you get right down to it, I don't believe that the explanation of God really matters. Does it make a difference? You bet it does. In the long run, though, we can debate what's true and the practicality of everything and scientific probability of it all until we're blue in the face. People have been doing that for thousands of years and I doubt they are doing to stop anytime soon. Good for them. But you know what? If you can walk out of worship today and explain away the doctrine of the Trinity to your friends and co-workers and strangers on the street in a way that makes sense but still are unable to let go—are still trying to stuff God into a box of your making, trying to shape God into what you think God should be—then you're singing the song all wrong. It's “Here I Am, Lord.” Not “Here, I Am Lord.” If you're just going through the motions and not experiencing God, maybe you need to move your comma.

Today's scripture opens with “In the year that King Uzziah died...” In other words, “from this point on, things are never going to be the same.” King Uzziah was a pretty great king—as far as kings go. Life was good under his rule. When he died, anxiety and fear ruled the land. The political and social and economic climate became quite unstable (to put it mildly). And Isaiah, like other folks when they are faced with uncertainty and change, went to church (or, in his case, temple). Maybe he went out of habit. Maybe he went because he was looking for some answers. Whatever the reason, he got something

way beyond what he expected: he saw God. That's not quite true. In the temple that day, Isaiah got to experience God. In that moment, he understood the Trinity.

Now before you start figuring dates and doing the math in your head: Yes, I know that this event takes place long before Jesus was born and way before the Holy Spirit blew through God's people in the upper room. Doesn't matter. Isaiah may not have been able to articulate the doctrine of the Trinity at the end of the day—after all, not all of the parts were in place yet. But he could articulate the experience of the Trinity. Or, at least, he could try. Knowing that words would fall short of what he knew to be true, he still tried to paint a picture of flowing robes and flying creatures and billowy smoke and coals of fire so that others—people like us—might be able to grasp the reality that God is bigger than we can ever imagine, but still as close as our next breath; not human, but not in-human; and a force to be reckoned with that still wants more than anything to be in relationship with us.

At that, in a nutshell, is what the mystery of the Trinity really is: relationship. A relationship we cannot earn. A relationship we can only respond to. Right here. Right now. Isaiah got to experience it all. That's amazing.

Equally amazing? Isaiah's response to the majesty and wonder of God. "GO AWAY!" He said. Look in your bulletins. You'll see it. In print it looks more like: "Woe is me. I'm lost. I'm nothing. I'm not worthy. I am SO not worthy. You can't possibly want me." But it means the same thing. Leave me alone. I can't do this.

To which God (through the seraph) very tactfully, patiently, and eloquently said: "Hey, Isaiah—shut up." Again, it reads a little different in your bulletin. The story says that after Isaiah had been babbling away for awhile, a seraph took a hot coal and put it on Isaiah's mouth—which did, indeed, shut him up. But it also purified him. Healed him. Gave him a moment to breathe and think. Gave him the courage to stop wallowing and open himself up to the whole truth that not only is God something that just can't be adequately explained to most people, God wants to be in relationship with Isaiah. No matter who he was or where he had been, Isaiah mattered to God.

Now if God or a seraph would have asked Isaiah, "Whom shall I send" before Isaiah's encounter with God, his answer may very well have been, "Here, I am Lord." (to quote the song) As I pointed out earlier, that's an answer given by someone who goes through all the motions and knows all the right words to say but for some odd reason just doesn't want to give up that illusion of control.

But that wasn't Isaiah's answer this time. Because he had opened himself up and because he had experienced God—all the majesty and holiness and grace and love of God, he was able to move the comma and answer (again, to quote the song) "Here I am, Lord"—an answer that could only be given by someone who had experienced the amazing grace found in the mystery of a God-beyond-all-explanation. He got it.

"Here I am, Lord. Send me. Use me. Mold me. Whatever you need, I'm yours."

A move of the comma. That's what I want you to walk out of here with today—not the ability to recite the doctrine of the Trinity but the desire to experience the truth of the Trinity. If not an actual move of the comma, the urge to want to move the comma. The curiosity and hunger to look for God in the ordinariness of everyday life. In the ordinary days in the Ordinary Time to come, I hope and pray that you will let go and experience God in such a mind-blowing, life-altering way that you can't help but say "yes" to a life that is amazing beyond your wildest dreams. A life that words cannot fully express, a life full of awe and wonder and grace.

In case you're thinking, "Yeah, Angie, that all sounds good—but hey, I'm lost and unclean—God couldn't possibly want me!", I have something to tell you. And it's not 'shut up'. It's actually a quote from Marianne Williamson, a quote made famous when Nelson Mandela spoke it to the world a few years back. It goes like this:

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate,  
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.  
It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.  
We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous—Actually, who are you not to be?  
You are a child of God.  
Your playing small doesn't serve the world.  
There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people  
Won't feel insecure around you.  
We were born to make manifest the glory of God within us.  
It is not just in some of us: it is in everyone,  
And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously  
Give other people permission to do the same.*

May you discover, in the ordinary weeks and months to come, that these words are true. Your playing small does not serve the world. You are a child of God—an amazing, awesome God who wants nothing more than to be in relationship with you.

Pretty cool.

Happy Trinity Sunday, everybody. Amen.