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"Edge of Words" Dr. Rachel Toombs (05/26/2024, The First Sunday after Pentecost: Trinity Sunday)

Come Holy Spirit and fill this place.

Amen.

Good morning, St. Albans, are you from up here?

Our reading, our first lesson today comes from one of my favorite books of the Bible

and one of my favorite stories in that book.

And that is the call of the prophet Isaiah.

Now call narratives show up quite a bit in scripture.

Some of the most familiar ones are maybe Moses with God appearing through the burning

bush and telling Moses to let his people go to go proclaim that.

Or later Saul turned to Paul on the Damascus road with a blinding.

The theme across these kinds of call narratives that they tend to be pretty bizarre, pretty

wacky, some weird stuff happens, and this passage in Isaiah 6 is no exception.

I want us to think today about what the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams,

speaks about as the edge of words.

What he means by that is that there are times when our speech and our usual language

fills us where we find ourselves at the edge of what we want to say and we can't quite

do it, justice.

Sometimes the edge of words come to us in very normal life situations, things like grief

or disappointment or that feeling when you're falling in love and you sound like a sap

but you know there's more there and you just can't get to it.

But there are also times when we speak about things that are beyond us and we find ourselves

at the edge of words and nothing is more beyond us than fully understanding what is going

on with God, who God is and the way God works.

And so it's unsurprising that in this first lesson of Isaiah, we find Isaiah struggling

at the edge of his words to explain quite what he is seeing and hearing and experiencing.

As an example, we begin with Isaiah telling us that he saw the Lord

sitting on a throne
high and lofty, cool, cool, I can track that, I can imagine that.
And then we were told that the hem of his robe filled the temple.
Now we could read past that and keep on going but let's take a moment,
everyone look at
your hem, your hem on your shirt or on your skirt, a hem is a small
part of a garment.
And to say that that fills the whole temple means that that is either
an abnormally large
hem or a very large garment that is filling the entire space.
For the sake of our imaginations, let's pretend like this is the
temple.
Imagine the hem of a robe filling up the whole space.
Either, Isaiah is lying because there's no way the hem could fill up
the whole space
and he could see anything.
Or he is trying to capture something that is really hard to capture
which is to say that
what it means for the Lord to fill this space is beyond our
imagination of ordinary things.
Where things like hem can fill entire spaces.
Even more bizarre, we get to the serifs.
Now we sometimes hear serifim and teribim and we nod our heads, we're
saying about it,
we're like, yeah, cool, we know what that is, no, we don't.
We don't know what that is.
Let's come from the Hebrew word for burning or to be burned.
Later when the coal touches Isaiah's lips, it's called live.
Any of you who have the chimney for your barbecue, now you light the
chimney with the
coals in it and you know the coals are ready when they turn this
brilliant, blazing red
when the flame drops and they're just glowing, that's the picture we
get of the serifs.
So you have these glowing creatures, okay, I can kind of imagine that.
They have six wings and they're flying, okay, cool.
And then they also were told one pair of wings is covering their face
and one their feet.
So they are glowing creatures with six wings with faces and feet.
This is getting quite strange.
The best way I can imagine this is a mix of like angels and
dragonflies of flame.
Like it's a little, we get a little bazaar I think is the right word
and it's on purpose
because these are heavenly beings.
These are not things, Lord willing, that we see in our backyard.
These are things that come in these special moments when earth and
heaven meet.
The serifim say this phrase that we adopt in our own liturgy that we
will hear later

today and what's known as a songdoose, just so you know the Book of Common Prayer has the Bible all over it and this is a place where we see that when the serif say holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory. Now the whole earth is full of his glory. I think it's meant to be a parallel to the hymns of the robe filling the whole space. We are meant to think abundance of glory and glory represents it is God's presence in the world. This filling is more than I feel full from breakfast or I feel full of joy because the timbre wolves are in the western finals and might beat Texas and I know you're all going to throw stuff at me. That's okay. It's different than that. What is getting at here is a kind of fullness that means a kind of, it cannot handle more. And the image I get because I am a person of images is from a video that shows up in my Instagram, Rails feed. I'm one of those people, you know, I just, I like to be entertained and the algorithm seems to think that this entertains me and it is right. And it is these Icelandic men, I think they're buddies and the camera is on them all circled around their sink, around a tap. And it's called the water cup challenge, I don't know if any of you have seen this. But the goal is to alternate between people, to fill up a glass of water, full but not overflowing. So at first they're really aggressive, they turn on the tap, the cup is half full, three quarter full, they make their grounds. But then as you can imagine, the cups are to really fill up. And these rather charming Icelandic men get very excited and nervous as they turn on the tap just a little bit to see how much more water can add without it flowing over. And I am no scientist, I am far from it. But it seems that the surface tension of the water allows the cup to handle more than it could seem at first glance. So you see this kind of dome effect of the cup as it's not spilling over yet, it's this dome of water where every drop makes the dome bigger and bigger until

finally it overflows.
That picture of that cup of water at capacity where one more drop and it would overflow,
I think is what we are meant to imagine with this proclamation that the earth is full
of God's glory.
Not just that it's everywhere and God's glory is everywhere, but that it's so full that
one more drop it would just exceed anything we can handle.
And that picture is tied to something that theologians of the church have articulated
in various ways when they try to talk about the Trinity.
And today is Trinity Sunday, don't worry, we're not going to get deep in the weeds I promise.
But throughout church theology, there have been these images that link the life of the
Trinity with the creation of the world and the glory of God in it.
And the basic logic is this, you have three persons, one God, father, son and Holy Spirit.
And in the picture of something like a dance, the father and the son and the Holy Spirit
love each other, three persons in unity so fully that it is like an act capacity machine
of love and self-giving and thanksgiving.
And out of that abundance of love and self-giving, it only makes sense for that triune God to give
of itself to create something other than itself, which is us and the world, that beginning
that we find in Genesis 1.
So creation itself then is a reflection, a mirror of the unending love within the Godhead
of father, son and Holy Spirit.
Now if you're beginning to feel overwhelmed, it's okay, I kind of did that on purpose,
because I want to bring us to Nicodemus.
Nicodemus, who we read about in John, we read about him here in John 3 and then later in
John 19 when Joseph of Aramacea and Nicodemus take Jesus' body and put it in the tomb, if
any of you remember that, he shows up a couple times.
Nicodemus is a smart dude.
He has had formal training and scriptures and theology.
He has trained much like Jesus in the way that God is working in the world.
He also has a lot of money and prestige.
He's known for being generous and influential, which might help explain why he comes to
Jesus in the dead of night because he has a reputation to keep up.
And Jesus was not exactly the most popular dude in Jerusalem.
And so Nicodemus comes to him and he says, I see that there is

something about you that
I don't fully understand, but it seems true.
There's something about what you say and what you do that I don't
understand, but I want
to know more.
And Jesus is like, cool, you want to know more?
And then he makes it really easy by talking about being born again and
having new life
and heavenly things.
And Nicodemus is like, I don't get this.
How can we be born again if we've already been born once?
And he begins to unpack this and for being a very smart man, his
intelligence doesn't
allow him, and is a good reminder for those of us that are academics,
doesn't allow
him to understand all things like what is happening in the divine
economy of God.
And so Jesus sums up with Nicodemus, maybe not so much for Nicodemus,
as for us to remember.
These words about what he is trying to get at in this conversation
with John 3:16, which
I know some of us have, from wrote memory, for God so loved the world
that he gave his
only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have
eternal life.
And then it continues, indeed, God did not send the Son into the world
to condemn the
world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.
So you have this trinitarian picture of the Son, the Son of God, the
second person of
the Trinity, coming into the world that has been made in order to draw
the world up into
heavenly things, into divine things.
Here Jesus paints for Nicodemus and for us a picture of life that
comes after death,
which is only accomplished through Jesus, only through the second
person of the Trinity,
of God breaking in in a way that the world has never seen before.
The only echoes we have of it are with the creation of the whole
world.
This is God doing what only God can do.
Here we see, once again, like we saw in creation, the love and joy of
the trinitarian life
spilling over into the created order, not only creating things and
sustaining things, but
bringing them to completion, which means defeating death, the thing
that marks our mortality
by bringing us up into the divine things.
Here we are not only full of the glory of God in this earth, but we
are given access

to the never-ending font of love and joy, which is the trinity.
Here we are given access to God's very self, which is both an
unceasing, never-ending,
inexhaustible sort of love, and also one that is intensely personal,
because being
a triune means that God is an intensely personal God, which means that
God inviting us into
these heavenly things through the life, death, and resurrection of
Jesus is for you, joy.
It's for you, Larry.
It's for you, John Michael.
It's for all of us, personally, known.
We are adopted in in this act, we are what we read in Romans, grafted
into the triune life
of God, where we can call on God the Father through the power of the
Holy Spirit, which
we saw in Pentecost last Sunday, which is all made available to us
through the person
of the trinity of Jesus Christ, through the outpouring of love of the
three-person God
and the incarnation of Jesus, where something new is made possible
that we could never do
on our own.
For us, as Episcopalians, we have this font, which is not uncovered on
accident.
This baptismal font here, where last week we saw some people baptized
into the church,
which also means, and we say this in our baptism letter, either they
are welcomed into the
household of God.
It is through baptism that what has been made available, that not only
does God create
the earth, but draws us up, invites us up into divine and heavenly
things through this
font, through death turned to this baffling picture of life.
It is a place where we find ourselves, theologically, liturgically, at
the edge of words, because
it deals with heavenly things.
This invitation that we find at the font is one made in love.
We see love here.
It is an outpouring of the triumphant love of God for all that God has
made.
It is one where we remember, we remember our baptism, and we can
remember today, as
I invite you to do this, dipping your fingers into the water on your
way to the rail,
to know that what it means for these baptismal waters to be given to
us is access not just
to knowledge of what has been accomplished in Christ, but an
invitation up into the divine

life of God.

It gives us hope, hope even at the edge of our words, hope that seems implausible or impossible, hope that cannot be expressed except through maybe tears or fumbled words, hope for things that like Nicodemus seem to feel are simply bombastic or unreasonable. That's why we are fools for Christ.

It is those things.

This hope is grounded in the never running out, always brimming over love and delight of

the triumphant God, both within the life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the love

for all that the triumphant God has made, including you.

This hope is a foretaste of heaven.

It is a place where we come together with the communion of all the saints, getting a

taste of eternal life which we will experience someday in full with the triumphant God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Let it be so.

Amen.