

May 30, 2021 – Isaiah 6:1-8 & John 3:1-17

It is springtime here in Missouri. It'll be summer in just a few weeks. And while this is a beautiful time of year, full of comfortable temperatures, green grass, and blooming flowers, it is also the time of year for something far more dangerous: thunderstorms.

Now I know, for many of you, that's not a particularly threatening thought. Midwesterners are notorious for enjoying thunderstorms. For standing out on our porches as lightning flashes and thunder booms. Of hearing the tornado siren and going outside in search of the funnel cloud, just to enjoy the spectacle of it.

But thunderstorms can also be quite fearsome. Just over a week ago was the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Joplin tornado. A tornado that killed 158 people, injured over a thousand more, and caused \$2.8 billion dollars in damage. Even for the bravest – or most foolish – among us, thunderstorms can be truly terrifying.

And so there's always that moment when we see a thunderhead approaching, see the towering black clouds with the glow of lightning from within and the dark shadow it casts upon the land, when we wonder, “Just how bad will this be?” Will this be a pleasant rain shower that waters the earth, causes plants to grow, and generally gives us an enjoyable spectacle? Or will it be a deadly tempest that destroys everything in its path?

Isaiah has a moment like that in our Gospel lesson today. Not with a thunderstorm, mind you. No, Isaiah has an encounter that is far more dangerous. An encounter with God himself.

It happened in the year that King Uzziah died. Which is significant for two reasons. Number one, it communicates to us that it really happened, at a specific time and specific place. It wasn't just a story that Isaiah concocted.

Number two, it tells us that we are at the very beginning of a very dark period in Israelite history. We are at the beginning of the reign of Uzziah's son, King Ahaz. Quite possibly the most idolatrous, wicked, despicable human being who ever sat on a throne. A man who not only rejected the God of Israel, but actually sacrificed his own son to a false god.

So, in the year that Uzziah died and Ahaz became king, Isaiah finds himself one day staring at the throne of God. It is an immense throne, high and lifted up. And around it are seraphim, angels with six wings that cover their head and feet and fly around the throne.

And they call to each other with voices that shake the entire temple, “*Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.*” And the room is filled with smoke and earthquakes. Smoke and earthquakes, most likely, just like those that descended on Mount Sinai when God met with Moses to give him the Law.

And Isaiah remembers what he read in Scripture about Moses meeting with God. And he remembers that God had made clear that anyone who looks upon his face will die. Yet, here Isaiah is, standing before God, looking upon his face.

And suddenly, Isaiah realizes that he is staring at a thunderstorm. That he is staring at the Lord. At the Lord Sabaoth, which means “the Lord of hosts.” The Lord of angel armies. The Lord of heaven and earth.

But Isaiah is just a man. A man who has said sinful things and done sinful things and thought sinful things. And he lives in the midst of a people who have a king who worships false gods and practices human sacrifice. A people who readily and willingly follow this king into pagan worship. A people whom God should have punished or just abandoned years ago.

And so Isaiah is filled with dread. He is staring at something so big, so terrifying, so unknowable, that it drives him to despair. And all he can do is cry out, “Woe is me! For I am lost!”

He's not the first to have that reaction, nor will he be the last. The Israelites felt the same way as they camped at the foot of Mount Sinai. In fact, they sent Moses up onto the mountain specifically so that they didn't risk coming face to face with God.

And, interestingly, Martin Luther spent quite a bit of time feeling that way about God as well. In fact, his entire time as a monk, prior to the Reformation, is spent in the fear of an immense, terrifying, unknowable God. Luther entered the ministry as part of a vow to St Anne that she would spare him from a thunderstorm. But, in an ironic way, he can't escape the thunderstorm. It follows him. And the more he learns about God, the bigger and more fearsome it becomes.

He's not alone. Churches around this country have spent decades, even centuries, preaching fire and brimstone about this all-powerful, all-knowing, eternal God. Who judges sinners and demands our obedience. They preach what Luther called the hidden God. The God wrapped up in a thunderstorm of Law and wrath.

And to be fair, there are ways in which God is very, very hidden from us. I don't know God's mind. I don't know why God does things the way he does. I don't know the extent of God's power. The extent of God's wrath. I don't know how it's possible for there to even be an uncreated, eternal God, with no beginning and no end. It breaks my human mind to ponder such things. Even shakes my faith to consider them.

These things are hidden from me. And they are terrifying to think about sometimes. I am so small. And the thunderstorm is so big. How can I ever survive it? Woe is me, for I am lost. For I am a man of unclean lips. And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.

And then God reaches forward. And he touches me with a hot coal. And with cool baptismal water. And he takes away my guilt. He atones for my sin.

And he reveals himself to me. He reveals himself to me in Jesus Christ. God made flesh. Who lived and died and lived again. That I might know the joy of sins forgiven.

That I might know that God so loved the world that he gave his own Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. That I might know that God did not send his Son into the world to be big and fearsome and hidden. That he did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

And he reveals himself to me in the Holy Spirit. A Spirit who still works in totally unknowable ways. Who works like a gust of wind, coming and going where he pleases. And all I can do is feel his presence when he shows up. And yet a Spirit who does a very real, very concrete work in me. To bring me to rebirth through Holy Baptism. And new life in the kingdom of God.

And so God may be hidden and terrifying like a thunderstorm. Yet he is also revealed and life-giving, like a cleansing rain on a hot summer's day. He is both, simultaneously. He is hidden and revealed. Judge and advocate. Priest and sacrifice. Law and Gospel. He is everything we fear and everything we need.

He is the Triune God. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. One God in persons. A blessed Trinity. He is holy, holy, holy. For the Father is holy, the Son is holy, and the Holy Spirit is holy. And yet there are not three holies, but one holy.

He is the Lord of Host, with power over angels. And he commands those angels as ministering servants to us, his people. The whole earth is full of his glory. Glory enough to kill Moses and Isaiah and all the people of Israel. And yet, we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

And so today, on this Trinity Sunday, we look upon this holy, infinite, eternal, almighty God, and we don't see just a thunderstorm. No, we also see a loving Father who made us. A loving Savior who redeemed us. A loving Spirit who sanctifies us.

And having looked upon this blessed Trinity, we not only live, but we cry out with Isaiah in joy, "Here am I! Send me." Amen.