

Gracious God, we rejoice to listen for your Holy Word. Teach us to live in love, that we may proclaim Your compassion to a riven and desperate world. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

“Here I am; send me!” What would it mean to stand before the glorious throne of Almighty God, the One who has created everything that is, and say, “Here I am; send me!”? Thrilling. Terrifying. Isaiah knows. Isaiah sees a vision of incandescent divine majesty: the LORD enthroned in glory, “high and lofty” in the heavenly Temple, with fiery supernatural beings, the six-winged seraphim, flying through clouds of incense, singing ceaseless praise in thunderous voices that shake the foundations of the Temple! ^{see also Rev 4:2–11} Isaiah sees God—and he is stricken. “Woe is me! I am lost,” he keens, afraid he’ll die because he, a mere mortal, has seen the LORD of Hosts.¹ A seraph flies toward him—imagine *that* for a moment!—and purifies him, touching his mouth with a live coal from the altar.

Freed from his sin, Isaiah is ready to testify to the Holy One of Israel:

- a God who enacts justice on behalf of the oppressed, ^{Isa 3:13}
- a God who puts an end to bloodshed and brutality, ^{Isa 5:1–24}
- a God whose kin-dom is a realm of “endless peace.” ^{Isa 9:2–7}

Isaiah is to bear witness to the power of God for justice, healing, and peace.

He is so eager to serve the purposes of his inexpressibly holy God!

“Here I am; send me!”

And he does a magnificent job. Isaiah crafts exquisite poetry and dramatic storytelling—brilliant stuff—using every spiritual and rhetorical tool at his disposal. Generations pass, and prophetic scribes in the tradition of Isaiah offer new songs about a Suffering Servant who will enact justice, ^{Isa 42:1} who will be a “light to the nations” and bring salvation “to the end[s] of the earth,” ^{49:6} a Servant of God who will be afflicted ^{50:6} and will suffer an unjust death so as to “bear the sins of many” ^{52:12–53:12} (all in Isaiah, these prophecies of the Suffering Servant).

And a new word is roared from Zion: “Thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:

I dwell in the high and holy place,

and also with those who are crushed and humbled in spirit,

to revive the spirit of the humbled,

and to revive the heart of those who have been crushed.²

... Peace, peace to the far and the near, says the LORD;

and I will heal them.” ^{Isa 57:15, 19}

The LORD dwells with all who are crushed, afflicted, and oppressed.³ The purposes of God are peace and healing. But the people would not understand. *We* would not listen to the prophets.⁴ Hosea, Amos, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel—commissioned by the very hand of God, yet we ignored them. Almost as if we didn’t want justice and healing for our communities! As if power and control of resources and amassing wealth were more important to us than God’s justice! Century after

century, we have given our energy and our ingenuity to wars and exploitation, callously disregarding those who suffer. The Gospel of John puts it succinctly: “people loved darkness rather than light.” ^{John 3:19}

Another intervention was urgently needed. So God sent Jesus. Working miracle after miracle right in front of people—in front of thousands of people!

All they had to do was believe in him.

But how? Believe in what? What is belief?

This question is crucial to the Gospel of John.

Everything hangs on this:

the truth of God’s love,
the healing of the cosmos,
eternal life itself,
and, for those who follow Jesus,
how we should live, as believers.

For the Gospel of John, thankfully, belief has nothing to do with parroting orthodox theology—mouthing the tenets of doctrines we only half-understand. In John, belief means giving yourself—heart, mind, and strength—to the One who offers living water gushing up to eternal life, the One who is the Light of the World. ^{4:15; 8:12; 9:5} Whether you understand or not. Belief is yielding to the mystery of God’s love in Christ.⁵

Nicodemus teaches us about this. In the lesson we heard a few minutes ago, Nicodemus seeks out Jesus. This faithful Jewish leader knows Jesus is from God. And he's so eager to understand the mystery of what God is doing in Jesus! But he's also afraid, so he comes to Jesus under cover of darkness. He's taking a tremendous risk: his peers in the Temple leadership are opposed to Jesus and are devising a way to assassinate him.

Nicodemus does not immediately grasp how one can be reborn by the Holy Spirit. Who can blame him? The Third Person of the Trinity was not known in his days. The Holy Spirit will not be sent until Jesus has ascended into heaven—the Gospel of John says that plainly in John 16.^{16:7; cf. 14:16–17, 26} I submit that Nicodemus is the hero of every believer or seeker over the centuries who has been baffled or skeptical and desperately wants to ask, “But ... but how? HOW are these things possible?” Nicodemus the teacher⁶ models for believers how to explore and question so as to learn—a cherished pedagogical mode at the heart of rabbinic Judaism and *core* to how faith works in the Gospel of John.⁷ We question, we struggle, and we learn.

Nicodemus asks. And in explaining about the Spirit and about his own coming crucifixion, Jesus gives a response that has become the most famous verse in all the Gospels, a profound illumination of divine Love:

“For God so loved the world that [God] gave [God’s] only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”^{3:16}

For God so loved the world! Echoes of Deuteronomy: God loving those who are faithful to the thousandth generation, ^{Deut 5:10; 7:9} and God loving the stranger, the outsider. ^{Deut 10:18} We cannot know when Nicodemus committed himself to Jesus, but I like to think that hearing Jesus's response about God so loving the world, that's when Nicodemus chose to become a disciple, whispering to Jesus, "Here I am; send me!"

Later, Nicodemus will stand up to the Temple authorities, citing Deuteronomy's requirement of a fair trial ^{Deut1:16-17; 16:18-20} to stall those scheming to kill Jesus.⁸ And after Jesus's crucifixion, Nicodemus will bring 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes to anoint Jesus' body, a bold public display of devotion. ^{19:39-42} Nicodemus is critiqued by some as a "coward" for having come to Jesus by night. But that reading is misguided. Nicodemus honors Jesus and is rightly venerated as a saint in Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christianity.

Friends, on this Trinity Sunday, John 3 gives us God the Father, Jesus the beloved Son, and the Holy Spirit, our Advocate and Guide: all working in love to transform the cosmos!⁹ Our job is simply to believe. How, though? How? We dare ask the question because blessed Nicodemus has shown us the way. Belief cannot be reduced to intellectual assent. With apologies to systematic theologians everywhere: I think it's impossible for any human being to understand the mystery of the Trinity. But we can believe even when we don't understand! In John, belief

is not certitude. Far from it! Belief is action: finding our way to Jesus, however we can manage it, so we can participate in the glorious purposes of God.¹⁰

I'm going to borrow a move from our evangelical friends and suggest an acronym to help us remember that belief is action. Ready? Here it is: ACT. ^{sign} A—C—T.
Act.

- 1) ^{sign} **A** is for **awe**, that deep sense of wonder at the incomparable holiness of God. Even when we don't understand, we bow, as Isaiah did. We bow in awe before the Holy One whose invincible power is beyond our imagining.
- 2) ^{sign} **C** is for **courage**. We go to Jesus with all the courage we can muster, as Nicodemus did, knowing our lives will be changed when we encounter him and his miraculous signs¹¹ of the abundance of God's kingdom.
- 3) The last letter in our Trinitarian acronym, ACT, is ^{sign} **T**. **T** is for **trust** in the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit. We must be "born of the Spirit," opening our hearts to what the Spirit will do in our lives, surrendering to the Spirit's direction, wherever it may take us.

Friends, to believe means to ACT (^{sign} A—C—T):

To bow before our Creator in **awe**,

To go to Jesus with **courage**,

And to **trust** the Holy Spirit.

When we believe—when we move forward in ^{sign} A-C-T awe, courage, and trust—then with Isaiah and Nicodemus, with apostles and martyrs, teachers, labor

organizers, peacemakers, artists and musicians through the centuries, we can dare to whisper, “Here I am; send me!”

In the Name of the One who calls us and loves us beyond the telling:

Jesus Christ, to whom be all honor, glory, and praise, now and forever. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Carolyn J. Sharp

26 May 2024

Trinity Sunday, Year B

Isaiah 6:1–8; Psalm 29; Romans 8:12–17; John 3:1–17

Preached at St. Thomas’s Episcopal Church, New Haven, Connecticut

¹ See Exod 33:18–23.

² נָסַף in adjectival, verbal, or nominal form signifies having been crushed or pulverized, literally or metaphorically. See the following references (not an exhaustive list). The bolded ones are most significant for Isaiah 57: Deut 23:2; **Job** 4:19; **5:4**; 6:9; 19:2; **22:9**; 34:25; **Ps 34:19**; 90:3; **94:5**; **143:3**; **Prov 22:22**; **Isa 3:15**; **53:5, 10**; **Lam 3:34**. In Isaiah 57, the context has to do with the three-way contrast between the righteous, who are continually oppressed (57:1), those who had been brutal themselves but whom the LORD will nevertheless heal because their punishment—viz., the Babylonian exile—has been sufficient (see 40:1–2), and the callous wicked who persist in their oppressive ways, for whom there will be no peace (57:20–21). The beautiful promise in 57:15 may imply repentance on the part of those whom the LORD will save, but it should not be interpreted in an overly spiritualized way as signifying only, or chiefly, contrition. This is a divine promise of rescue to those who have been crushed and abased by others.

³ The LORD is Immanuel, “God with us,” as Messiah and Advocate for all who are persecuted, exploited, and callously destroyed—not only humans who suffer, but all living beings in the community of Earth who endure degradation, torture, and eradication by those who heartlessly disregard their right to flourish.

⁴ “We”: I underscore our own rejection of the witness of the prophets, in the spirit of Romans 11, to forestall any potential arrogance on the part of Christians who might misunderstand Isaiah’s polemic as directed at Jewish believers *as Jews*, per a distorted ideology of Christian supersessionism or anti-Semitism.

⁵ It is a mystery even for that first preacher of Christ, John the Baptist, who admits, “I myself did not know him, but I came baptizing with water [so] that he might be revealed to Israel.” ^{John 1:31} The Baptist elaborates, “I saw the Holy Spirit descending from heaven like a dove and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but . . . I myself have seen and have testified that Jesus is the Son of God.” ^{1:33–34} This is important for Johannine theology. None of us can know Jesus until we yield to mystery and seek to testify, however we can, to what we see God doing in Christ.

⁶ When Jesus says, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?,” his tone is assuredly ironic. Within the narrative plot, Jesus is expounding a mystery unlike anything the world has ever known before, so of course it would be difficult to understand. Metanarratologically, it is precisely Nicodemus’s need to understand that is instructive and spiritually formative for the audience of the Fourth Gospel. *Pace* those who find Jesus to be rebuking Nicodemus harshly, I agree with Sandra M. Schneiders, who underscores that the implied competent reader is meant to find Nicodemus sympathetic (*Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, revised and expanded edition [New York: Herder & Herder, 2003], 117–118). Notice her emphasis on praxis—“doing”—in these observations: “The reader’s original sympathy for Nicodemus is vindicated for the textual Nicodemus is actually a type of the true Israelite, who progresses in faith from seeing the signs, to doing the truth according to the scriptures, to finally confessing Jesus openly as the one in whom the Old Testament finds its fulfillment. . . . Nicodemus functioned in *John’s community* as a hero of its Jewish Christian members, but his primary function in the *Gospel* is to catch the conscience of the reader. Nicodemus is the very type of the truly religious person who is, on the one hand, utterly sincere and, on the other, complacent about [their] knowledge of God and God’s will.” Such believers must, “like Nicodemus . . . begin the process of coming to the Light not by argument or reasoning but by doing the truth, a process that gradually opens them to the true meaning of the scriptures” (119; emphasis original). I agree with Schneiders’ point, “We are meant to identify with Nicodemus, thus recognizing ourselves as believers”—or earnest seekers—“and at the same time mistrusting ourselves as those who too readily presume that they understand the Christian mystery. We, like Nicodemus, are religious people who tend to be overly confident in our faith-based knowledge” (122), or, my own concern, too casual or lax about pursuing wisdom and a radical Christian ethic in light of God’s revelation in Christ.

⁷ As Christopher W. Skinner writes, “Misunderstanding is a major motif in the Fourth Gospel. . . . Many characters are unable to understand Jesus. . . . Apart from the Beloved Disciple (and possibly John the Baptist), no character fully grasps what the audience has learned from the Prologue. Armed with this information, the

audience is able to evaluate the different character responses to Jesus—all of which fail in one way or another—and further grants the Johannine Jesus narrative space to clarify elements of his message, mission, and identity.” See Skinner, “Characterization,” pp. 115–132 in *How John Works: Storytelling in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Douglas Estes and Ruth Sheridan; Resources for Biblical Study 86 (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2016), 127–128.

⁸ See 7:1–52. The threat of summary execution is clear, for Jesus and for any who support him publicly (see vv. 1, 13, 19, 25, 30). After Nicodemus counters the murderous intent of the authorities with Torah-based reasoning (vv. 50–51), they say to him, “Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you?” The threat to Nicodemus is unmistakable. That same threat against Peter, and by extension other followers of Jesus, is dramatized in all four Gospels after Jesus has been arrested (Matt 26:69–75; Mark 14:66–72; Luke 22:54–62; John 18:15–27).

⁹ Herman Ridderbos writes, “The text’s exclusive concern is the fact and the magnitude of God’s love. It is love that not only manifests itself in God’s power over death, the death into which the world (like Israel in the wilderness) would sink; in the death of Christ it also identifies with the world in its lostness and thus imparts the deepest meaning to the great statement in the prologue, ‘and the Word became flesh’” (*The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* [translated by John Vriend; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997], 138).

Systematic theologians argue fiercely about the ways in which love should or should not be considered to characterize the Persons of the Trinity in their mutual interrelating. My claim here is that love is central to the Johannine understanding of the purposes of God in creating and redeeming the cosmos. For New Testament texts that prove perennially challenging for orthodox doctrines of the Trinity, see Douglas F. Ottati, “A Low-Flying Trinitarian Theology,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 43/1 (2022), and many biblical commentators on the texts he mentions. I am no fascinated by the kind of speculation about intra-Trinitarian relationships that absorbs the attention of systematic theologians. For medieval theologians who argue that love is a hallmark of Trinitarian mutuality of relations, see Thomas McCall, “What’s Not to Love? Rethinking Appeals to Tradition in Contemporary Debates in Trinitarian Theology,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 25/4 (October 2023). McCall cites Richard of St. Victor, Thomas Aquinas, Peter Lombard, Bonaventure, Henry of Ghent, Johann Gerhard, and others.

¹⁰ In “Resurrection Preaching in the Gospel of John” (*Religions* 15.514 [2024]), Karoline Lewis writes, “In the Fourth Gospel, to believe is synonymous with being in a relationship with Jesus” (7). Further, his resurrection “means an invitation for Jesus’ followers to live out the promises of eternal life here and now.... embodying one’s belief in Jesus in daily acts of mutuality,” for “resurrection is not a topic for belief, but the human condition of moving from fear to joy, experienced fully in our real bodies” (10).

¹¹ The seven miraculous signs Jesus performs are structurally and theologically vital in the Gospel of John. They point to who Jesus is as the Son of God and teach the community about the power of God for restoration, nourishment, and joy in abundance. Jesus says, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (10:10).