

**First Sunday after Pentecost: Trinity Sunday, Year B, RCL**  
**Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 29; Romans 8:12-17, 13-17; John 3:1-17**  
**The Rev. Danée Ashley**  
**May 31, 2015**

Summer is definitely coming—the days are getting longer and the nights are shorter. When I served my cluster of rural parishes in the beautiful Southern Tier of New York state, we lived in a house surrounded by acres of grass and farmland. It was gorgeous and also definitely country living. As we lived into the summer, there was a lot of activity happening in our house at night—owls, crickets, frogs, and then we began to have sounds coming from the attic. Scratching sounds. At first, we knew there were squirrels up there because the sounds were bigger, but they left and then the mice moved in and they would party all night ☺

Unlike the mice, we often do things at night or under the cover of darkness because we are afraid of having other people see what we are doing. What we are doing may not be approved of or may require the utmost secrecy.

In our Gospel of John today, the night is also a symbol—it symbolizes evil and ignorance. So, for Nicodemus to come to Jesus in the night means not only that he is coming under the cover of darkness because he doesn't want anyone to see him, but he is also coming out of ignorance and into the knowledge of Jesus, the light of the world. Nicodemus was a Pharisee and was a member of the Sanhedrin—a governing body of the Jews who were very suspicious of Jesus. Nicodemus would be jeopardizing his position by coming to Jesus during the day and so he comes to him by night.

This encounter with Jesus is important, not only for Nicodemus but for us, too. Jesus answers questions that we all have.

When I served a parish in North Carolina, it was common in the wider community to hear the questions, “Are you saved?” and “Are you born again?” One of my friends was relating a story to me about a group that he was part of that happened to be discussing these questions because they didn't understand them. Suddenly, one of them said, “Well, what does being born again mean anyway? I mean, you can't be pushed back into your mother's uterus.” This is an identical question to what Nicodemus asks Jesus. That language doesn't make sense when thinking about it literally. But here Jesus tells us, “...no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” A spiritual rebirth is essential in entering into the kingdom of God and we can't do this alone. We must have Jesus to boost us up to that spiritual level through his work on the cross. We cannot do this alone.

This is in direct contrast to what Nicodemus had learned as a Jewish person. In the Judaism of that time, you were born into God's Chosen People. That is how you obtain membership. It was an exclusive club. But here, Jesus is saying, no, you don't have to be physically born into a specific chosen group in order to know God, instead you can be part of the kingdom of God through a spiritual rebirth. Anyone is welcome and anyone belongs.

“God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” Jesus came to save us from ourselves—the parts of us that come to him under the cover of darkness. The parts of us that are in need of a spiritual rebirth.

We are in a time where those places that are the most difficult for us can be brought before Jesus as we walk with him. This is a time for us to examine our own spiritual lives and realize where we need to be refreshed and recapture the awesomeness that God holds for us. When the prophet Isaiah in our Old Testament reading today is confronted by God in his vision – a God who is so vast that the mere hem of his robe fills the whole temple – Isaiah’s response is to fall down in awe and worship. Where are those places of awe for us now? How do we respond to a God that gifts us with spiritual rebirth?

A seventh-century Syrian named Sahdona, also known as Martyrius, the bishop of Beth Garmai, wrote this about Isaiah’s vision:

*He can be seen by us in the Spirit even now, if we wish – not that he is contained on the throne in any form external to his nature, just “filling the temple with the extremity of his train,” as the prophet beheld. No, he is hidden in the loftiness of his hiddenness in the inaccessible light of his nature where he lives and reigns over all the extremities of the universe in the majesty of his dominion ...*

*His creation is full of the splendor of his glory: “the seraphim” of fire “stand” there to honor him, the ranks of the many-eyed “cherubim” escort his majestic Being, the bands of spiritual powers dash around ministering to him, the throngs of angels fly hither and thither with their wings, and all the orders of spiritual beings serve his Being in awe, crying “holy” in trembling and love, “as they cover their faces” with their wings at the splendor of his great and fearful radiance, ceaselessly crying out to one another the threefold sanctification of his exalted glory, “saying, holy, holy, holy, Lord Almighty, with whose glories both heaven and earth are full.”*

These words resonate with a profound sense of the strangeness and awesomeness – in the old-fashioned sense – of God. And yet, these ancient words are also right at home in our modern, scientific, technological sensibility. The cherubim and seraphim, in their shiny, many-limbed strangeness, have probably already been on the Sci-Fi Channel.

The Eucharistic prayer we are using this summer speaks of God’s creating not just the earth, but “the vast expanse of interstellar space” – reminding us that God dwells in the farthest galaxy as much as in the human heart, and that the mind of God knows and comprehends both the dizzying distances that span the universe, and the individual movement of each molecule in every cell of every living creature. What can our response be to such power and holiness, other than that of the prophet, to fall down before God and humbly confess our limitations?

And yet, the vast expanse of God’s incomprehensibility is not just something to be astounded at. Just as our knowledge of God’s closeness is a source of strength in the tough times of our lives – so our awareness of God’s hugeness gives our imaginations, and our spirituality, room to breathe, move, play, and explore. We need never fear that we can come to the end of what we can discover about God – and God’s creation. We need never be afraid of running out of mystery.

The tremendous expansion of human knowledge in the last couple of centuries has led some people to reject the idea of a transcendent god, thinking that such an idea is fit only for people who think the world is flat, or that the heavens consist of ten concentric spheres. It seems to me, though, that the more we learn about the universe, the clearer it is how much more there is to know. And despite everything we have discovered and achieved, God remains unknowable and unimaginably great. The bigger, wilder, and

stranger the known universe gets, the bigger, wilder and stranger must be the God who continues to exceed it in majesty and strangeness.

The paleontologist, Jesuit priest, and mystic Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) puts it this way:

*“Science alone cannot discover Christ. But Christ satisfies the yearnings that are born in our hearts in the school of science... Science will, in all probability, be increasingly impregnated by mysticism.”*

*(My Universe, 1924, IX, 83)*

Because Sahdona and the other writers like de Chardin wrote down their commentaries on the scriptures, we who live years later are able to benefit from their insights, expanding our concepts of how people can think about God. Like the cherubim calling to each other “Holy, holy, holy,” they call our attention to God’s holiness and God’s strange transcendence.

We should do the same for each other: sharing our experiences of God; calling each other’s attention to the ways God is working in our lives and in the world; proclaiming “Holy, holy, holy” to each other when we receive visions of God’s glory. Thus, we can continue to remind each other of the greatness, the strangeness, the wonder, and the inexhaustibility of the God we worship: three in one, holy, holy, holy. AMEN.

*Excerpts regarding Sahdona are from The Rev. Grace Burson and are used with permission.*