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Jessica: Welcome to Lectionary Kickstart, where we're sparking your thoughts for Sunday as you plan your sermon or teaching lesson.

I'm your host and producer, Jessica Bordeleau, talking with Dr. David Schmitt and Dr. Peter Nafzger.

They're both professors of homiletics here at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

You can hear all about us in our introductory episode, but trust me, they are pretty good preachers... usually.

All right, let's get started.

David, where are we in the church here?

David: It is Trinity Sunday, the time in which the church remembers the teaching of the Trinity.

Jessica: And what are the texts for this week, Peter?

Peter: The texts are Isaiah 6, Acts chapter 2, John 3, and Psalm 29.

Jessica: As always, I ask each of you to tell me which text you would choose to preach on.

To determine who goes first this week, I want to know which image you use when you talk about the Trinity with little kids.

And if it's my favorite too, you get to go first.

Peter: I hate images of the Trinity.

Jessica: What?

No!

Peter: Yes, I hate them because inevitably they always fall short in some way, and at some point you have to say, well, the Trinity is not like this anymore.

David: That is true.

Peter: No matter what it is, I just would rather just talk about God the Father and God the Son and God the Spirit.

Jessica: That is a noble thought, but you lose this contest by default.

Jessica: And David, you get to go first.

David: Good, and I don't even have to give an image of the Trinity.

So, Jessica, what is your favorite image?

Jessica: So when St. Patrick went to Ireland and he tried to explain to the Celtic false pagan religions there the idea of three-in-one, he used the shamrock, right?

One plant with three persons.

One plant with three distinct parts.

Peter: This is why I hate Trinity analogies.

David: And then you have the four-leaf clover.

Jessica: That's not the shamrock.

That's not the Irish way.

But I always thought that that was the best I could do with little kids.

And when I was little, that one was the one that made the most sense to me as a start.

David: Well, so I would choose Isaiah 6.

I'm not really sure it has much to do with the Trinity, but I would choose the text anyway.

It's a text that's revealing the awesome majesty of God.

And it is beyond comprehension, right?

So you find Isaiah in this temple and just the train, just the hem of God's robe fills the entire temple.

And so there's this God who's beyond the temple, beyond comprehension of Isaiah.

This is the revelation we have.
And so that's really the connection, I guess, with the Trinity.
I don't know.
So what I like about this text is that it is a call narrative.

So you think about individuals in Scripture and how they come into the positions that they hold.
You've got Moses in the burning bush.
A while ago, we had Samuel, who hears this voice.
He's not exactly sure who's calling him.
You've got Elisha, who sees Elijah taken up in a fiery chariot.
I mean, you've got all these different call stories.
And it kind of makes you wonder, what do people take away from these call stories?
And I kind of think of in my own life when you're talking with people and you find out,
you know, you kind of say to them, so how did you get into this position?
How did you get into this line of work?
And then they kind of tell you things about their past.
And sometimes they're really surprising.
You know, you've got some small town girl who's a CEO of a Chicago company.

You've got a New York City boy who's doing, I don't know, wildlife preservation in Oklahoma.
And you're just going to...

Peter: There's wildlife in Oklahoma?

David: I know, yes.

And you're preserving it.

That's why they're preserving it.

So you've got these strange stories.

So like Jessica, have you ever been interested in where somebody came from?

And how does that shape the way you look at them?

Jessica: Absolutely.

I love trying to crack the nut.

I like getting to know people and figure out what makes them tick.

And I think if you know part of their background, you can understand them more.

David: I think that is, that's exactly how I think.

And that you've got, you've got these figures in the Old Testament, Isaiah being one of them,

he's going to narrate his call because in a sense, it might help us understand what makes him tick.

And so as you look at this text, I'd like to look at it through the lens of why is this experience important for us to know as we encounter the ministry of Isaiah.

And so Jessica, if you could read verses five through seven of the text.

Jessica: And I said, 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.

For my eyes have seen the king, the lord of hosts.

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar.

And he touched my mouth and said, behold, this has touched your lips.

Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.

David: Okay, so at the heart of the call narrative is this one moment that Isaiah narrates

where he knows what I would call the mighty mercy of God.
You know, we have that hymn, holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty.
And at the end of that hymn, you have holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty.
And so those are the two qualities that Isaiah sees in God in this moment.
Number one, that God is mighty, that God is all powerful.
And he's seen this lord of the armies, the lord of hosts.
And he is frightened, scared to death that he's going to be struck dead.
And yet this God who is almighty is also merciful.
And that lies at the heart of the ministry of Isaiah.
And sometimes I think, you know, when we hear the story, I've often felt this way
about narratives in scripture that we read them too fast.
That we because, you know, we already know the ending and we just kind of try to get
through it and get to the end.
But if you slow down your reading, this is really an incredible moment.
So Isaiah has had this vision of this almighty God.
Right.
And you have these angels that are flying about him, these seraphim that are flying
about him.
And we're told that they had six wings, two of them covered their face, two covered
their feet and two with two they flew.
So you've got these angels, you can't see their faces.
And I think, you know, the angels are hiding their faces from the almighty.
They're not looking upon the almighty.
But Isaiah is the one who actually sees the almighty.
And Isaiah realizes that he's, you know, a dead person because he's seen God and he's
a person of unclean lips and he cries out, he's a person of unclean lips.
And then you have verse six.
Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken
with tongues from the altar.
I mean, if you don't know that he's going to touch his lips and say your sin is
forgiven, that's a really frightening moment.
You know, number one, you have an angel who you can't see his face.
So how the heck does he know where he's going to put this coal?
Right. And he's flying toward you and you're thinking you're going to die.
And you're like, OK, this is how I go.
I'm going to be burnt by an angel with a coal from an altar.
Right. I mean, it's just very frightening.
And then when the angel touches his mouth, so he actually touches his mouth with the
with the coal. And that's when he says, this has touched your lips, your guilt is taken
away. And I think that that is kind of like a moment of life experience.
That I think would change you.

Peter: Yeah. Yeah.

I mean, this whole scene is so when you slow it down, like you said, you see the train
film, the whole temple, you see these seraphim, these burning things.

I mean, our images of angels are probably not quite doing justice to what's going on
there. And this whole thing is so strange and odd to help people recognize the the
otherness of this whole situation is huge.

David: And it's just it's it's just frightening.

And so at the heart of Isaiah's call is this moment that I believe has been seared into his memory of recognizing who he is before this almighty God and being afraid for his life and then experiencing that the almighty God is mighty in mercy.

And so if you think about his ministry, he's going to be a prophet of a God who has a mighty, merciful mission.

And so that's kind of the first thing I see there.

And then the second thing I see there is that it opens his life to a meaningful mission.

I mean, at the heart of the experience is this mercy of God.

But then at the closing, he hears the voice of the Lord saying, Who am I going to send?

Who will go for us?

And it's amazing that, you know, the almighty Lord doesn't say what he wants somebody to do. He doesn't say what the qualifications are.

He's just like, who's going to go?

And Isaiah is like, well, here I am.

I just think it's to me, it's amazing that Isaiah, having experienced the mighty mercy of God, is like whatever this God is going to do, I'm willing to be part of it.

I'm just going to go because it's not dependent upon his abilities.

Obviously, he recognizes his sinfulness and God has not destroyed him.

So the mission of God is not going to depend upon his abilities.

It's going to depend upon the might and the mercy of God.

And Isaiah is just there.

I'm one for doing that.

And so it just helps me think about, you know, as we think about our life experiences and how they shape the way we act among others.

And as we think about our experiences as Christians, our experiences as coming to worship and how the Lord works in our life, that it's going to shape us and it's going to change the way we live in the world.

And we're people who have a meaningful mission, who serve a God who is mighty in his mercy.

And that would be kind of the point that I would try to make in the sermon.

Peter: In a way, this would, you know, you might highlight the first Sunday after Pentecost more than Holy Trinity Sunday here because we just have celebrated the sending of the church.

David: Correct.

Peter: To fulfill the mission of God.

And so this would fit well with that.

It would help you kind of take the mission of the church the previous week and help people think individually in terms of their own part in that.

David: And how they were brought into it and how God has worked in their life through it.

Jessica:

You know, I think the people in the pew are going to be encouraged because I've heard people say, I can't serve God.

You don't know what I've done.

You know, I'm not good enough.

Oh, you don't want me.

But God picked Isaiah and he cleaned him.

He forgave him.

David: God's mighty in his mercy.

Jessica: Peter, what about you?

Peter: Well, it's Trinity Sunday and Trinity is kind of a hard Sunday for me to think about. It was always hard because, you know, the Trinity is beyond our comprehension. You know, the whole thing is the father incomprehensible, the son comprehensible, the spirit incomprehensible. The whole thing is incomprehensible.

David: Yeah.

And so, you know, I would not try to make the Trinity less incomprehensible, I don't think.

David: That's probably the problem, right?

Is that we try to, we want to pin it down and explain it.

Peter: Right.

David: And any time you start explaining it, it's so easy to get it wrong.

Peter: Well, and in this respect, our faith is kind of the Trinity is like an example of what we try to do with our faith all the time, right?

We want to understand God and we want to understand his ways and we understand.

David: And there's nothing wrong with that.

Peter: There's nothing wrong with that.

But there's certain things.

I mean, God's ways are higher than our ways and God's nature is higher than our ability to understand it.

David: Right.

Peter: And so I don't want to try to understand and unpack here's what the Trinity is like. We kind of lose the wonder and the sense of awe and then the trust, because once you understand something, you don't have to trust it.

David: Right.

Yeah.

There was a writer who wrote a devotional book called Recapturing the Wonder. And he has this story he tells about hiking and seeing these things he called frost flowers. And they were just beautiful and mesmerizing. And so he goes back to the camp to tell other people, hey, come here and look at it. And they all went out there and they saw these frost flowers and then somebody looked it up on their phone and it explained how these things appear. And as soon as that happened, they all just kind of walked away.

Peter: And it's like, well, and that happens all the time. So my family likes to go to national parks and that kind of stuff. And you go, you see this incredible canyon or this incredible mountain, and then you see some poster or some sort of sign that says, oh, yeah, this was formed billions of years ago. You just think, why do we have to even put that sign there? Just marvel at it. It's beautiful. It's incredible.

David: And we feel like we control it. We own it now that we can explain it. And that's not going to happen with God.

Peter: Right.

So that's kind of the attitude with which I would approach a sermon on Trinity Sunday.

And when I think of it in those terms, the Gospel reading from John 3 stands out to me, especially the person Nicodemus.

So I would start, I think, Jessica, would you read verses 9 through 12?

Jessica:

Nicodemus said to him, how can these things be?

Jesus answered him, are you the teacher of Israel?

And yet you do not understand these things?

Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and bear witness to what we have seen, that you do not receive our testimony.

If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

Peter:

All right.

So this part of the conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus has come.

Well, it starts with Nicodemus coming to Jesus, coming by night.

And he knows something about Jesus, but not everything.

And so that's a good start.

Right.

And that's where sometimes the Trinity analogies, we know something about the Trinity, but not everything.

And so Nicodemus does what you should do.

He goes to one who can help them understand.

And that's when Jesus talks to him about entering a second time into his mother's womb.

And you can imagine Nicodemus just going from, well, I thought I knew something, but now I know even less.

And so he's even more confused and he's marveling about these words of Jesus.

And Jesus basically says, you know, you don't know much.

So listen up.

David:

And you're a teacher of Israel.

Peter:

And you're a teacher of Israel.

David:

That's right.

Peter:

How are you?

How are you?

David:

That's what we face every time we come to the Trinity on Trinity Sunday.

Peter:

Yeah.

Pastor told me, explain the Trinity.

Oh, it's tough.

How do you not know this?

You're a teacher.

So what I want to do, I think in the sermon is help people identify with Nicodemus as an individual.

And I want them to help them be okay with the fact that they don't know everything, but they know to whom they shall go to learn and to grow and to find what is true.

And in that respect, Nicodemus is a good example for us.

David:

Yeah, that's nice.

Peter:

But the idea that God is beyond our comprehension and that's okay, that would be kind of a theme in this sermon.

David: Yeah.
You don't know everything, but you know what you need to know.

Peter: Yeah.
You don't know everything, but you do know who to listen to.
Who to go to.
So Nicodemus comes to Jesus.
And what does Jesus do when Nicodemus comes to him?

Well, he teaches him some basic truths.
I'm not sure I want to bring John 3:16 into this at this point here.
Jessica: Oh, no, that's the only verse that you can give me because you're right.
But we need more than that.
We're sitting in the pew listening to you.
You're right.
We can't get it all.
But I need to know who I'm worshiping.
Give me a little bit more than that.
Tell me what you do know.

And if all I go away from the sermon is that God the Father sent his son because he loves me.
Okay.

I've got something to take me home.
But if you just leave me with, well, it's a foggy mystery.
We really don't know.
Well, then who is God?
Who am I worshiping?

Peter: Well, the reason I'm hesitant to bring in John 3:16 is if you remember back in Lent not long ago,
we just had this John 3:16.

So if you really dug into that passage, like my pastor did, I've still got a fresh John 3:16 thing in
mind.

And but I think I, you know, I hear your point, Jessica, that to think about John 3:16 in the context
of Nicodemus's question,
instead of going back to Moses in the wilderness, maybe that would be a way to hear this.

David: Well, the interesting thing is for Nicodemus, John 3:16 is probably not understandable,
but he's slowly going to understand it over time.
When you look at his life experience in the Gospel of Mark, you know, he comes at night,
he goes from a he goes from nighttime visit of Jesus to a morning visit to the tomb.

He goes from being kind of ignorant of the things that Jesus desires him to know to finally kind of
coming out with 40 pounds of spices as a way of honoring this one who has been crucified.

And and in the middle there, he's having kind of a little bit of an argument with the Pharisees.
If I remember, there's a scene where they're questioning, they're questioning Jesus and
Nicodemus kind of stands up for him.

And then they push back at him and say, you know, are you you know, no prophet comes from
Nazareth.

You know, you should go read the scriptures.

And so this poor guy is, you know, he's he's struggling to understand.

But after the death of Jesus, there's something that's clicking for him because now he's just kind of moved from darkness to light.

And a more powerful witness to his honoring of this one who gave his life.

And so it's kind of a you know, it might be, you know, that this is a mystery that you live with that becomes clearer as you go along and follow the ministry of Jesus.

Peter: Well, I think what's helpful about this line of thinking is that we're going for trust and growth rather than complete understanding and answering every question.

And that's where the connection to Trinity Sunday could be helpful, that we remember this, the doctrine of the Trinity, understanding of God, not so that we can pin it down and have it all clear and button everything up ...

David: And move on to something.

Peter: ...and move on.

Instead, we confess God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit as an act of humble recognition of how God has revealed himself to us.

And that leads us to further following Jesus.

This is just the beginning of Nicodemus' story.

And so he's kind of humbled here by Jesus.

You're a teacher. You don't know these things.

And instead, what he does with that humbling is not turning away, but following Jesus further and more.

David: Yeah, keeping his eye on him. Right.

Peter: Yeah. Yeah.

So I think the Nicodemus, the person of Nicodemus and the things that Jesus tells him here.

And you're right, Jessica. John 3:16 is for God so loved the world, he gave his only son.

That simple truth that Nicodemus couldn't have understood what it meant to give his only son until after the resurrection, really.

That opens his eyes to the ways of God.

Jessica: Well, that's all for today.

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