

Sermon: Year B, Trinity Sunday

Texts: Isaiah 6:1-8

Romans 8:12-17

John 3:1-17

I'd like to begin this morning with a parable, one that I've told before, taken from a story I read twenty-five years ago. But it's come to my mind often in the time since, and it's been a useful reminder of the deeper responsibilities we all share when we face anything that's holy.

In a book of short essays about modern art, the noted Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky recounted an early experience in elementary school. He was eight years old, and the assignment given to the students was to paint a picture of a horse. Kandinsky's classmates finished quickly, but he labored on slowly, captivated by his own mind's eye of a horse's grandeur: the strength of its hind quarters, the immense breadth of its chest, the beauty of its mane lifted by the wind stirred up by the motion of a full gallop. Every brush stroke he made was deliberate and, in the best sense, reverent. After a while, the rest of the students began to fidget as he carefully studied his picture, contemplating what to do next. And finally, the teacher, who had grown impatient too, briskly walked over, looked at the painting, and declared that all the horse needed was a set of hooves. She proceeded to take a brush filled with black tempura and, one, two, three, four, she slapped on what, to her mind, completed the picture.

Forty years later, when Kandinsky wrote about this event the pain of it was still evident. The teacher, in her haste – in her carelessness – had destroyed his work. For when he looked at the canvas, all he could see were a series of heavy, black blotches: ghastly and obstinate. They were awful scars that obliterated all the grace, nuance, and subtlety of the rest of the figure. Yes, a horse's hooves can be black, but even a hoof should never be rendered so monochromatically. Art itself deserves more respect than this. And so, even more, does any horse, real or imagined. If we are going to dare to re-present any part of life or creation by the work of our own eyes and hands, then, said Kandinsky, we must learn to be assiduous – never presumptuous, never impatient, never wanting to finish just in order to get on to the next task. For too often what we will leave for others to see will only be clumsy, ugly splotches – Kandinsky's hooves – that, in spite of being well-intentioned, obscure a far greater loveliness.

Today is the feast day of the Trinity, which, truth be told, is a daring celebration, because what we declare is what we understand to be the very form of God. God, we say, looks like this. The word Trinity, however, never appears in the Bible. It wasn't used by the Apostle Paul or any of the Gospel writers. It's a doctrine that emerged only after several hundred years of Christian faith and practice, when the councils of the church determined that it was needful to try to draw God himself into sharper focus. And if you read the Church Fathers you will soon discover just how assiduous they were in this task, debating fine points of theology, pouring over Scripture, reflecting on the experience of the church, testing everything by measure of the most advanced logic of the times. After decades of work, they rendered their still majestic picture, one that is concisely stated in the creeds, which we recite even today. But these provide only the barest of summaries. The actual doctrine is highly nuanced and unfolds in thousands of pages of discussion, and the simple formula we know was never meant to be a staid portrait of the absolute being of God. It was meant, rather, to be only an initial lens through which we could

better perceive the dynamic, relational nature of God, both within God and with us. When the early Fathers put their minds and hands to this, they drew a horse at full gallop.

Yet centuries later, what we have retained is little more than Kandinsky's hooves. Practically speaking, the Trinity has been reduced to a set of static names, spoken too carelessly: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And these names have been all the more reified in images of persons too tightly drawn. There is the great, old man with the white beard aloft in the clouds. Jesus is the dusty renegade, admirable for his teaching, remembered for his love, respected for his sacrificial death. And the Spirit, more aloof, appears only now and then, sometimes like a frat boy raising havoc. But we don't have much more of a picture than this. We show little patience for the mystery that the Church Fathers meant to portray. It's as if, impatient, we finish the picture in these simple blotches, often unaware that our quick summary may serve to hide God more than reveal who God truly is.

And this is what is at issue in the reading from the prophet Isaiah. The Lord appears in a vision, and the scene is frightful, for every structure is shaken and every limit surpassed. God overwhelms, and all that Isaiah can do is cry out that his words are neither worthy nor adequate. He is, he claims, a man of unclean lips. And here, once again, we can too quickly mar the text with Kandinsky's hooves instead of contemplating God's grandeur. Unclean can easily be read as merely a synonym for sinful, and sinful, in our minds, turns to images of moral failure and accusations of guilt. Isaiah, we might presume, is just like us: he's caught by surprise, interrupted by God, and his first impulse is a primal fear – God has caught him with his hand in the cookie jar. He is exposed, embarrassed, and ashamed – perhaps by a mental list of a hundred petty offenses.

But it's precisely this response that God moves to correct. A coal is touched to Isaiah's lips, and with this action, he is informed that sin is not so much a matter of our unworthiness – God's judgment pointed against us; more deeply, sin is our inability to look outside of ourselves to recognize the worthiness of God. It's our judgment against him. We choose to live smaller lives, neatly contained, self-defined. Which is easy enough to do, especially if the art of our lives is just a series of assignments done to fill up a space of time before moving on.

But Isaiah prompts us. We are given the privilege to speak for God, to re-present him and to offer in the testimony of our own person a picture of God's majesty opened to us. "Whom shall I send?" God's question is a call, and it's our invitation to be magnificently unsettled. God asks that our vision not be bounded, comfortably set within common borders, but that we may be continually astonished and enthralled by the extravagance of God's beauty in all creation and beyond all time. Even hooves, if seen, reflect this mystery. They have their own complexity and fascination. And if art and horses deserve the respect of our assiduous attention and patience, then how much more should we afford the same to God?

"Here am I," said Isaiah. It's a response of complete freedom and full association. "Here am I." "Send me." There's not even a hint of restriction here, of faith as a dull constraint. To follow is to gallop, which, we may all need to be reminded, is the true picture of the Christian life.

Twenty-five years ago, as I was reading Kandinsky, Pat Davidson was ordained – providentially, on Trinity Sunday. There could have been no more appropriate day, nor, I will dare to say, any more appropriate candidate. Here I stand, indebted. For Pat, with remarkable resilience and grace, has made of her own life a re-presentation of Isaiah’s vision, always pointing beyond the presumptions that limit our world and obscure God, always striving to open a greater world to sight, creation, which, once seen, reveals in every moment and in every aspect, even the hooves of beasts, the constant and surpassing glory of God. Her ministry has been her art, and her art in ministry has been a marvelous gift to us all.

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