

SERMON: Holy, Holey, Wholly

TEXT: Isaiah 6:1-8 John 3:1-17

They say that bad things come in threes. You're probably familiar with this superstition. It seems whenever there are two significant deaths that happen in a short period of time, people will begin to predict a third one or wonder who will be next. From an article I read, I learned that "Three candles burning in a room is bad luck and three knocks in the room of a dying person is a harbinger of death. Breakages and tipped over glasses of water come in threes. Three butterflies on a leaf is considered bad luck as is hearing an owl call three times." Also, apparently, there is bad luck in three strikes of a match. The article said this one originated during trench warfare. "If a match is alight long enough for three men to light their cigarettes, this is sufficient time to be spotted by the enemy, pin-point their position and launch an attack." (folklorethursday.com, Bad Luck Comes in Threes: Matches, Murderers, or Mathematics, by Madeleine D'Este, June 29, 2017)

Although, if you think about it, three is a common pattern in our lives, whether good, bad, or neutral. Stories all have beginnings, middles, and ends. A good sermon or lecture has three points, supposedly. Jokes often use a pattern of three – a priest, a minister, and a rabbi walk into a bar.... Fairy tales are built

around threes: three bears, three wishes, three brothers. Ready, set, go! The third time's the charm. And a three-day weekend? We all like that one!

Of course, for Christians – and for other religions, as well – three is a holy number. As we celebrate Trinity Sunday, we remember that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

When explaining the Trinity to children, I have used a book called, *3 in 1 (A Picture of God)*. The book uses an apple as a metaphor; the three parts of the apple being the peel, the flesh, and the core. It's all one apple, but it has distinct parts.

At other times, I've explained the Trinity in terms of "me, myself, and I". Though I'm just one person, I wear many hats and play many different roles: I am a sister, a mother, a friend, a pastor. And I don't stop being a mother or a friend when I'm in the role of pastor; all those things make me who I am.

Then there's the ancient and traditional example of a clover, with its three leaves representing the three persons of the Trinity.

In the Trinity, God is complete. Three in one; one in three. The whole apple. Between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, there is relationship; everybody's there; everything's covered; Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, and everything in between. Even more than the three musketeers, the Trinity is "all for one and one for all."

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit cannot be separated, nor added to. You might also say that the Father is the "mind," the Son is the "body," and the Holy Spirit is, of course, the "spirit" or the soul. Everything God ever needed is right there within Godself.

One of my favorite hymns of all time is "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty." It occurred to me that these three words not only remind us of God's character as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But Holy, Holey, Wholly can also describe us and who we are in relation to the Almighty, with just a little change in the spelling.

First, God is HOLY. H-O-L-Y. The Almighty God who created all things is all-knowing, all powerful, rules over all things, and performs great miracles. Our God is to be respected, revered, and worshipped. One commentary noted: "The

text from Isaiah 6:1-8 emphasizes God's radical holiness. In his vision Isaiah encounters the first person of the Trinity, the Lord of Hosts, the Divine Other lifted so high in glory and splendor that even the seraphs must cover their faces. *Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; they proclaim, the whole earth is full of [God's] glory.*” (Kristin Emery Saldine, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3, p. 28*)

Holiness is a difficult concept to describe – especially to someone who has not realized the presence of God. How would you describe it? I think we get tiny glimpses of God's holiness when a beautiful sunrise or sunset takes our breath away, when music touches the deepest parts of our soul, when we witness or take part in acts of pure and genuine love, when we shout in a moment of great joy, when we are brought to our knees in a moment of terrible sorrow. Many of us would agree that the moment a baby is born is one of the holiest moments and greatest miracles we'll ever experience.

Which brings me to point number two: We are HOLEY. H-O-L-E-Y. We are God's creatures – sinful, fallible, mortal, full of limitations and full of holes. We are *not* God; we are *not* all-knowing, we are *not* in control. From that same commentary: “God is holy; we are not. This is the sad realization that hits Isaiah with such overwhelming force. We are sinners, we dwell among sinners, and we

live in sin-filled times. Too often we do not recognize this until it is forced upon us, and there is nothing like an encounter with the divine to shatter our self-centeredness and bring us to our knees in lament.” (Kristin Emery Saldine, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3, p. 28)

From the Gospel of John, we learned about Nicodemus, who met with Jesus in the night because he was afraid. Furthermore, this “teacher of Israel” shows his ignorance and misunderstanding when Jesus talks of being “born from above,” “born of water and Spirit.” Someone suggested that Nicodemus is a work in progress. Aren’t we all? And despite our holes and our ignorance and our sinfulness, God sent his Son into the world NOT to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Another Biblical scholar pointed out that when Jesus explains, *the wind blows where it chooses* this “is an image of God in search of humanity, a vision of God’s decision to turn toward humankind, to search for us, and to reveal God’s self to us in that activity. Why? Because it is the nature of God to be in relationship.... God searches for us to complete the revelation of God’s being. God searches for us to participate in God’s life.” (Judith M. McDaniel, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3, pp. 47, 49)

Although it is true that we are nothing without the God who created us, we must also remember that it is God who completes us, who fills our emptiness, who gives us the abilities to do what God calls us to do. Remember all the Bible stories that indicate that whenever God calls a person to a particular task, God assures that person, “Do not be afraid, for I am with you.” Remember that God’s thoughts of us are as numerous as the grains of sand, and that God counts every hair on our heads.

Furthermore, God’s work is incomplete without us. When God created us in His own image, God intended for us to be involved in the continuing work of creation. Our vocation, our primary purpose in life is not our job as a teacher or a mechanic or a doctor or even a parent, but first and foremost to glorify God and to do the will of God in whatever our worldly job or role happens to be. Holey – full of holes – as we are, God calls us. And as God fills the holes of our inadequacies, we need to fill the holes in God’s mission by answering God’s call.

Third, and finally, we are called to be WHOLLY. W-H-O-L-L-Y. As God is fully, completely, and wholly devoted to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we are called to be fully, completely, and wholly devoted to God. From the beginning of time God has been our God, the God of our ancestors, and the God who is for

us. Through the Holy Spirit, God breathed life into us at creation. Through Jesus Christ, God came to us in the flesh to love us, to teach us, to heal us. And when Christ departed the earth, He gave us the Holy Spirit again to be our Advocate and Comforter. When you think about it, all of scripture is really the story of how God seeks relationship with humanity. And no matter how many times throughout the millennia that we have turned our backs on that relationship, God continues to seek us out and wait for us to come home. Remember God's promise, which is repeated several times in scripture: "I will never leave you or forsake you."

Holey as we are, let us strive to be wholly devoted to the Eternal and Holy One-in-three, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

To the glory of God!

AMEN.