SERMON for Sunday, June 11, 2006
Isaiah 6:1-8, John 3:1-17
Trinity Sunday

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Wobbly Knees

How did you arrive here this morning? In one way of meaning, most of us would say we came by car or other automotive transport, a few walkers, a few bikers. Another way, some of us came in a large group or family of four or more, some on our own, some of us two by two as if we were marching on to Noah's Ark. But the question is how did you arrive this morning? With the excitement of baptism and first communion foremost on your minds? With grief weighing down your heart? With the pride of graduation accomplishment swelling the parental chest? With anxiety, joy or even a "ho-hum, why did I get up so early this morning" or "on this beautiful early summer morning I wish I was out there fishing"? But we all arrived, for many different reasons with a variety of concerns, lots of thoughts and feelings, expectations of what we will hear and experience. And here is the announcement: Today is Trinity Sunday, of which preacher Lane Denson says, *Preaching on Trinity Sunday makes me feel like the heart attack victim that called for a priest who, on arriving, moved the gathering crowd aside, knelt beside her, and asked, 'Do you believe in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost?' With great effort, the stricken woman addressed those surrounding her, 'Here I lay dying, and the priest is asking me riddles.'"* So many minds and hearts here today, the lifeblood and needs of a congregation, and all we have is a riddle.

Perhaps that is what Isaiah was thinking when he encountered God. What was this presence as he worshipped in the temple, this vision of the mysterious Lord of Hosts, who cannot be seen? This call to be a prophet took Isaiah right to his knees before the majesty of God. We cannot explain what he saw or felt – but he knew that the seraphs, or angels, represented the Creator of all. He knew that his voice to proclaim good news of God's justice and righteousness was unleashed through grace and forgiveness, symbolized by the cleansing fire of a piece of coal touching his lips. He knew that when the question was asked, *Who will speak for me?,* there was nothing to do but say yes. This is a riddle indeed, or if not a riddle, at least a mystery. It changed his life, and for many centuries this call of Isaiah to the ministry has been lifted as the way, in some form or another, in which each of us are so called to faith.

The God who cannot be touched or seen directly can be experienced. And this day we call Trinity is filled with mystery and the presence of God in so many ways. Someone described the Trinity, a theological doctrine as compared to a direct Biblical teaching, described it as *dogma, that's doctrine with legs, faith's more or less futile attempt to make sense out of nonsense.* So rather than begin with that which we don't understand, perhaps we should begin with what we do.

We understand babies. We take a look at Theodore Joseph about to be baptized, at the infants and young children that are brought to worship by their parents and grandparents, and all we know is wonder and awe at the miracle of birth. As Lieutenant-Colonel William J. Clear said in the heat of war in 1942, *There are no atheists in foxholes*. Someone at risk of dying might well discover again a faith and god they had forgotten. And anyone who has either given birth or witnessed a birth, or held or seen a new-born baby can, for the moment, assent to a miracle, and the existence of a Creator God. But to bring that same baby here for baptism is to come with rather wobbly knees and faint hearts. First of all, we ask that parents and

sponsors and indeed all of us renounce evil and the grip of sin on our lives. Daily living can sometimes block out the resolve of our *I do*. With so many choices before us for nearly everything from food to entertainment to political parties, with war and our inadvertent participation in it, with all the places of poverty and homelessness and violence, it is relatively easy minute by minute, day by day, and year by year, to live outside these walls quite apart and separate from the affirmations we make within. Secondly, we with parents and sponsors promise to nurture that baby, and all the baptized, in faith. It is a sacred vow, as important as fidelity in marriage and partner relationships, as the oath *to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help me God*. It is a far-reaching dedication, committing us for years. Will we keep it? Will we be encouraging parents? Will we share our own faith stories? Will we teach our children how to pray? Will we be exemplars of servanthood in the way of Christ?

Episcopalian priest expert in Christian education, John Westerhoff, writes in his book *Bringing Up Children in the Christian Faith*, of baptism: *What more brave, radical act can parents perform than to bring their child to the church to be baptized? Acknowledging that we are all born to die that we might have life, the parents celebrate in baptism both the child's death and resurrection. Parents know that when they do this they signify their intention to give up their child for adoption into a new family, with a new day of birth and a new family name – Christian. The child will belong now to the family of God…I sometimes wonder if we would bring our children to the church to be baptized if we fully understood the implications for either them or us…It is a long and arduous journey we share together with our children, helping them discover who and whose they are.* And he asks the same question that we ask today, the meaning of the mystery of God. How can we make these radical promises when we don't know all the answers to our children's questions, when we don't have all the skills we think we should have, when there is no right or wrong way of raising children, when the questions they ask are difficult, when we can't protect them from disease, death, and broken hearts? Westerhoff advises, *I must continually remind myself that all God asks is that I be faithful*. And that is the known, the sure, the absolute of today: God's grace is given to strengthen, guide, and sustain us through the unknown.

And today we understand the table, the bread, the wine. As we welcome Sam to the table today, as God welcomes us and we welcome one another, we are sure of the meaning of the bread, which is the body of Christ broken, the son of God come to earth to live and die, the embodiment of sacrificial living for the life of the world. We partake of the concrete, the touch and taste of wheat and grapes. In their first communion projects, our young people demonstrate and explain their simple and straightforward conception of how they want to be closer to God by taking in the very life of Jesus. But do we fully understand? The Worship Mission of our congregation recently led a fifteen people in a seven-week study of how and why we worship, the practices of Lutherans and this community in particular. On one evening the topic was communion, and we discussed how children are prepared to come to the table for the first time, how education and learning was an important piece of the preparation. Age is always a question, should it be two or twelve or somewhere in-between? At what age do we grasp the theological and spiritual depths of communion? And of course the answer is no age is the right age. Who can logically explain what it is to come to the table of the Lord, to come with our sin and our sorrow and our joy, to kneel next to a stranger and be strangers no longer, to look across the chancel and see the lines of worry on another's face and be joined in their pain, to open our hand and receive renewal and refreshment, to receive the living

Lord in newness each time. We never know fully, can never explain….we just come, drawn by a sometimes thin thread of faith and we kneel on wobbly knees of need and taste God's goodness.

Methodist bishop William Willimon described it well: *Sacraments are our outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace. But that still sounds a bit mystical, a bit ethereal and distant. A Better definition might be: Sacraments are visible and physical acts of God's self-giving love…We sit down for a little meal, a little polite religious conversation, and a little folksy Sunday fellowship. Then, before you know it, we are moved to tears, we stand naked before the truth, a voice penetrates the meaningless chatter, there is a rushing wind through our desert, and we know we are not alone*.

Today we understand about endings and beginnings. For some it is graduation, bringing for both parents and students new challenges and new relationships. For some it might be a family wedding or anniversary. For others a shift in personal circumstance, a job loss or gain or retirement, a health challenge, a death, a new love. New journeys of life and faith await us. We do not know what is before us and how we will meet this future. But it is Trinity Sunday, and what do we know? That God as Father offers us boundless love, that God the Son is the one who came down from heaven and through him we have eternal life, that God the Holy Spirit infuses our lives in mysterious and surprising ways.

The late theologian William Sloane Coffin said, *It is terribly important to realize that the leap of faith is not so much a leap of thought as of action. For while in many matters it is first we must see, then we will act; in matters of faith it is first we must do then we will know, first we will be and then we will see. One must, in short, dare to act wholeheartedly without absolute certainty.* There is not much certainty in our world, in fact it seems like more unknowns, more issues, more concerns, more perils, more catastrophes, more complexities than in other times in history. And, quite frankly, we are sometimes scared, scared for our children, for our youth, for ourselves. What lies ahead? We don't know. And that is all right, for the certainty that we do have is that we are always in God's holy presence, and so on wobbly knees we take that leap of faith. Amen.