

# **May 30, Trinity B (Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17)**

## **When words fail, the church sings—especially on Trinity Sunday.**

by [JoAnn A. Post](#) in the [May 19, 2021](#) issue

They braced themselves against the wind blowing across the bluff, standing in a close circle around a hole in the ground, arms around one another's waists. They had just lowered and buried their mother's casket by hand, and, as one, they inhaled deeply and began to sing: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty!" The rest of us encircled them with our bodies and our voices, though not loudly—we wanted to hear them sing, as we had so often before. They sang her into the next life.

She had suffered crippling arthritis for years, had been wheelchair bound for as long as I knew her. Her husband, himself old and bent, had cared for her in their home until she drew her last breath. They were a family of singers, some of them professionals. They tell stories of evenings in their childhood around the upright piano in the living room, their mother—before arthritis prevented it—lining out the melody of hymns, teaching them the words and the parts. They could sing anything in the old red hymnal and a fair number of show tunes, too. Mostly they sang for the sheer pleasure of singing together, but sometimes they sang because it was all they could do—arms around one another's waists, their voices rising and falling like the wind.

Trinity Sunday is the oddest of church festivals. Unlike other holy days, which celebrate events in the life of Christ or of the church, Trinity Sunday invites us to an idea. It grabs us by the scruff of the neck and gently shakes us, turning our attention from the limits of our language and images for God to consider an idea for which language and image eventually fail.

One in three and three in one. Indivisible yet everywhere. Beyond time. Without gender. This is the God whom we conjure when we sing "Trinity."

Isaiah describes God's throne room, crowded with many-winged creatures, shaken by earthquake and filled with smoke. The creatures' song ricochets from the walls, endlessly repeating a single mantra. "Holy! Holy! Holy!" No other word is sufficient, and no single voice can sustain it.

Paul invites the church at Rome to imagine a different image, to offer a different song. Paul chooses language not of royalty but of family: "Abba!" This God who is attended by angels, whose hem brushes the corners of the universe, is our parent, and we are children who confidently sing, "Abba!"

Dear Nicodemus. His song is a question: "How can this be?" Intrigued by Jesus—who has just tossed both tables and tradition out the temple door—he creeps toward Jesus under cover of darkness. If this Jesus has come from God, as Nicodemus suspects, then he is to be approached with reverence, as one would a monarch. With respect, as one would a rabbi. With trust, as one would a loving parent.

"How can this be, Jesus?" Nicodemus sings. How are we to be born again, to read the wind, to understand the signs? How are we to address you? How can any of this be? Later Nicodemus, with another unlikely disciple, will care for Jesus' bruised body (John 19). Does he sing softly to Jesus as they wrap him in linen shrouds and lay him in the tomb? "How can this be?"

When words fail, the church sings. Especially on Trinity Sunday.

When my daughters were small, every day ended with a ritual we called songs and prayers. After bath and a book, we turned out the lights to sing and pray before sleeping. Some of our songs were silly: "Five little ducks went out one day." (Thank you, Raffi.) But always we ended with a hymn. The last words my little ones heard as they closed their eyes were verse four of "God, Who Made the Earth and Heaven," a song in praise of the Trinity: "Holy Father, throned in heaven, / All holy Son, / Holy Spirit freely given, / Blest Three in One: / Give us grace we now implore you, / Till we lay our crowns before you, / And in worthier strains adore you, / While ages run."

At the end of the day, at the end of our lives, we offer our worthiest strains to God, who sits majestic on a throne and, at the same time, watches over sleeping children.

I can still feel the wind blowing on that beautiful bluff so long ago, carrying our voices up toward the heavens and down to the tiny village below. I remember singing as a choir around the grave of one we loved.

And I wonder, on this festival of head-scratching ideas and inexplicable joy, if another image for God—majestic in splendor, tender in mercy, mysterious as the wind—might be that of a choir. Is it possible that God’s love for us and for creation surpasses words, causing God to sing to us, of us, for us as well? God is a choir, singing around the world’s sorrows, restoring life, healing wounds, drying tears, arm around our waists.

I believe the only way to adequately praise God who is beyond our knowing is with song. That is why on Trinity Sunday we take up the seraphim’s single-lyric song: “Holy! Holy! Holy!”