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Isaiah 6:1-8

John 3:1-17

GOD IS NOT FLAT

Over a century ago, Edwin Abbott wrote a book called Flatland which described a place which existed in only two dimensions: length and width. It was flat as a piece of paper. There was nothing in that imagined land that had any height. In fact, there was not even a concept of height. There were a variety of characters in Flatland, but the novel focuses primarily on one who had equal length and width, Mr. Square. One day, Mr. Square received a visit from a figure from beyond Flatland named Lord Sphere, who existed in three dimensions, length, width, and depth. He tried to enable Mr. Square to understand the reality that exists in more than in just two dimensions. But Mr. Square couldn't fully perceive Lord Sphere in Flatland, seeing only different-sized circles as he passed through the two-dimensional place. There were limits of language and perception, a dimension yet to be experienced. Lord Sphere decided that the only way Mr. Square could begin to experience and understand a third dimension was to be led out of Flatland, where he could find out what it meant to be a three-dimensional cube. The author, Edwin Abbott, wrote the book under a pseudonym, identifying himself only as 'a Square.'¹ With that name, he implied his lack of understanding of the dimensions beyond himself. Mathematicians have enjoyed Abbott's imaginative glimpse into the limits of human perception, but it might have something to say to us as well on this Trinity Sunday.

We heard in our gospel lesson today about a conversation between Jesus and someone named Nicodemus. Nicodemus seems to be a person who is searching for truth, but he flattens out the meaning of whatever Jesus says to him. He can't quite move into the dimension or realm Jesus is describing. In contrast, we heard in our reading from Isaiah a narrative that has been described as the prophet's call to a broader ministry. The experience described takes place in the context of worship. As Isaiah begins to perceive God's holiness, his experience of worship moves to another dimension, as he begins to sense his own unworthiness in God's

presence. God doesn't leave him in that state, sending a needed expression of divine mercy. Having moved into a dimension called forgiveness, Isaiah can then hear God's word that is calling him to different level of ministry, and he responds with faith and hope, saying, "Here am I; send me." You might have noticed that our order of worship is informed by that passage.

Today has been designated Trinity Sunday. The Trinity is an understanding of God that calls us away from flattening out who God is in such a way as to fit our own little world. Scripture does not give us a comprehensive understanding of the Trinity, but we do get little glimpses that broaden our sense of who God is. If our concept of God is as only one of the three persons of the Trinity, then we will be enriched as we explore a fuller expression of the Godhead. We can use the traditional language of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Or we can use gender neutral language of God as the Source of Life, Word of Truth, and Spirit of Love. But whatever relational language we use, when we confess belief in the Triune God, we are making the bold and radical claim that the same God who created life out of chaos also walked the earth as Jesus. We are claiming that the One who experienced crucifixion, experienced the death of a beloved child at the exact same time. We are claiming that the One who ascended into heaven is the same One who is always with us. We are claiming that the One who prays for us even in heaven is the same One groaning deep within our souls for the redemption of creation. When we say we believe in a Triune God, we are boldly claiming that the God who is revealed in scripture is an on-the-move God who is acting now and will act in the future until all has been reconciled and made new.

One of the main analogies used to explain the Trinity is one which emphasizes that we worship and serve a God who has relationships at the very core of God's being. A way to talk about the Holy Mystery as Three-In-One is to talk about God existing as divine community. There is a mutuality and interdependence that is almost messy in its mysteriousness. It causes us to think of God as being in some kind of a circle or rather sphere dance. Such an understanding of the Trinity has profound implications for our life together as people created and shaped by God's power and priorities, as those who are born from above.

If God, at God's very core, is about mutually interdependent relationships, then what does that say about the biblical assertion that we are created in God's image? Our human inclination is to create God in our image, but as we begin to move beyond just a flat understanding of God, those implications move us toward relating to other humans in a way that shows some depth. Perhaps, we don't just exist beside each other, perhaps we aren't just supposed to care about each other - rather we deeply need each other in order to be fully human, in order to relate to one another since we are all part of Christ's body together. As Christians, we cannot simply exist on our own, in isolation, separate from other parts of the body of Christ. In order to really live out our identity as children of God, in order to live as baptized people, we are created, we need, we are called to be in honest and deep relationships with each other as sisters and brothers in Christ. We are to share one another's burdens as if they are our own, because they are. We rejoice together when one of us rejoices, and we weep together when one of us weeps.

If God is divine community at God's very core, then somehow, you and I have to figure out how to keep from losing out on who we have been created to be together. I don't always like that challenge from God, but I do believe it is real. Somehow, in God's great imagination and sense of humor, it is only when we are together that we see a greater dimension of the Holy Mystery. When we are together, that is when we are living out our identity as creatures beautifully and lovingly created in the very image of the Holy Mystery.

I am coming to believe that the poetic ambiguity of the Holy Trinity is a gift. For it frees us to imagine together what it means to be created in this relational image. It frees us from the need to perfectly explain or to define with only hard and fast lines. It frees us to be theological poets, not always bound by reason over rhyme. It also frees us to join the dance of the Trinity together. It frees us to rejoice in the beauty of the mystery, to complain about the messiness, and to face the challenges that come with our professions of faith in a God who brings a realm beyond us into our lives until such a time as when we can fully move into God's realm. Even in this life, we don't have to live in Flatland. All honor and glory be

now and forevermore unto our Creator, our Redeemer, our Sustainer who moves us into a whole new dimension. Amen.

¹ Edwin Abbott, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, first published in 1884 by Seeley & Co., London.