

angels praise God backward and forward, proclaiming that *the whole earth is full of his glory* (v. 3). So shocked by this vision is Isaiah that he proclaims his own unholiness and is cleansed (vv. 6-7). He then answers the call of God, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" with his own proclamation: "Here am I; send me!" (v. 8), or, to express the same thought palindromically, "Here am I; I am here!"

What's interesting about this text, however, is that it falls on Trinity Sunday, which is a day to celebrate the divine palindrome of a God who is "three in one, one in three."

It might be difficult to see the Trinity in Isaiah's vision (Isaiah likely did not have in mind God as Father, Son and Spirit), but when we read the text we can see a couple of Trinitarian references if we're looking at it through the lens of Jesus, the New Testament, and Christian history. Early Christian interpreters of Scripture were convinced that the whole intent of the Old Testament was to announce the coming Messiah, and Isaiah's vision carries with it a sense of hope and expectation that, when we see the fullness of God as Isaiah did, we see it in the Trinity.

First, there is the threefold repetition of "holy, holy, holy." We sing these words in the hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy" on Trinity Sunday, and the word unit palindrome reminds us of "God in three persons, blessed Trinity." The holiness of God, expressed in the person and work of the one and the three, becomes the center and experience of Isaiah's call and it continues to be the focus of the Christian life. We experience the holiness of God the Father as transcendent and powerful. We embrace the holiness of God the Son in his sacrificial love for us and all of creation. We live in the holiness of the Holy Spirit, which calls people to ministry in the model of the self-giving love of the Trinity.

Isaiah, struck by this vision of the fullness and holiness of God, experiences a deep change: the forgiveness of his sins and the commission to go and represent God to the people. His message to the people of his day reflects the call of God to the ancient Israelites: *Be holy as I am holy* (Leviticus 11:44). Jesus echoed that call in Matthew 5:48, while Peter said, *As he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'* (1 Peter 1:15-16). A life of holiness reflects the life of the Trinity.

The second Trinitarian echo we hear in the text is when God says, *Whom shall I send and who will go for us?* (v. 8). The "us" here would have been, for Isaiah, the heavenly court consisting of creatures like the angels who attend the throne of God. It's the same sort of "us" reference as Genesis 1:26, when God said, *Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.*

John tells us in his gospel that the Son, "the Word," was present at creation (1:1), thus the early Christians believed that the royal "us" included all the persons of the Trinity.

The "one in three, three in one," palindromic God has been present from the beginning and calling people to a mission that reflects the relationship and the vocation of the Trinity. In Genesis 1, God creates a community, a human family, to reflect the image of the Trinity and care for the creation. In Isaiah 6, the Triune God commissions a prophet to go and carry out the vocation of being God's messenger to God's people.

The three in one, one in three God invests in humans so that they, too, might be one in spirit and mission while being unique individual creations in the image of God at the same time. However, the nature of the Trinity is expressed - backward or forward - as the holy God who sheds glory abroad in the earth through the humans God created.

One of the finalists in the word unit category of the SymmyS goes like this: "Fishing for excuses? No need. You need no excuses for fishing." God sent Isaiah on a fishing expedition to cast out God's message of good news to a people who were already experiencing the bad news of impending exile. Jesus came and called his disciples and trained them to *fish for people* (Matthew 4:19). The Trinity is always fishing for people to send on that mission.

One of the great expressions of the nature of this fishing expedition comes from N.T. Wright, who succinctly puts the good news of the gospel like this: "God is putting the world right, so God puts people right, so that they might be his right-putting people." We see that pattern here in the call of Isaiah as well. God appears in the temple, the place where heaven and earth meet, with a mission to set the world right. God sets Isaiah right by forgiving his sin as the angels cleanse his lips with a coal from the altar. And then God equips Isaiah to become a right-putting instrument of God's will.

It's the same pattern we see in the New Testament: God, the Father and Creator, is renewing the creation; God the Son, the Redeemer, sets us right and forgives our sins through his sacrificial death on the cross; and God, the Spirit and Sustainer, sanctifies us and enables us to become the people who are participating in the Trinity's right-putting mission. We need no excuses for fishing; the Trinity has given us all the tackle we need!

One God in three persons. One in three and three in one. Palindromes force us to think about the language and words that we're using in a world where people are often careless in what they say and what they think.

The language of the Trinity, likewise, requires us to think deeply about the nature of God and the mission God has for us. The "one in three, three in one" God loves us backward and forward and calls us to remember the truth of another theological palindrome: "Dogma: I am God." That dogma is good news for us and for the world!

The following is a sentence palindrome which describes “reversed thinking from an atheistic viewpoint to a theistic perspective. Read down, and then reverse directions and read back up.

I live my life according to these beliefs.
God does not exist.
It’s just foolish to think
That there is an all knowing God with a cosmic plan.
That an all powerful God brings purpose to the pain and suffering in the world.
It is a comforting thought however
It is only wishful thinking.
People can do as they please without eternal consequences.
The idea that
I am deserving of hell
Because of sin,
Is a lie meant to make me a slave to those in power.
“The more you have, the happier you will be.”
Our existence has no grand meaning or purpose.
In a world with no God
There is freedom to be who I want to be
But with God.
Life is an endless cycle of guilt and shame.
Without God
In life everything is fine.
It is ridiculous to think
I am lost and in need of saving.

Various internet sources. YouTube (<http://youtu.be/jgFU5AK88-K>)

Sources:

- Steinmetz, Katy. "Madam, I'm Adam: Palindrome masters go head to head in championship." *Time Website*, time.com. March 6, 2013. <http://newsfeed.time.com>. Retrieved, October 1, 2014.
- Wright, N.T. "Paul and the faithfulness of God." Lecture at Denver Seminary. November 3, 2013.

The Palindromic God

Trinity Sunday, May 31, 2015
The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Isaiah 6:1-8 and 1 Peter 1:13-16

Are you *stressed* about *desserts*? Do you like to *air an aria*? Did you see ‘*A Santa at NASA*’ last Christmas? Then you might be an expert in the world of palindromes.

Palindromes, of course, are words or phrases that can be spelled backwards to make the same or other words and phrases. Like the name “Bob” or the sentence, "Madam, I'm Adam" – they read the same backward and forward. How about a more historical palindrome: "A man, a plan, a canal: Panama" or “Able was I ere I saw Elba.” You could jump into a "race car" and you'd be on your way to palindromic bliss.

In fact, some people have gotten so good at putting these backward words together that they now have their own competition. The first annual "SymmyS" awards for "outstanding palindrome achievement" were the brainchild of stand-up comedian Mark Saltveit who runs a magazine called *The Palindromist* for palindrome enthusiasts.

The winner of the short palindrome category in 2013 was this one: "An igloo costs a lot, Ed! Amen. One made to last! So cool, Gina!"

The best "word unit" entry (a palindrome that reverses words rather than letters, like "All for one, one for all") reads, "You swallow pills for anxious days and nights, and days, anxious for pills, swallow you." You have to wonder how long it took to come up with that one! This past year's winners were announced on Palindrome Day (5-10-2015).

Palindromes are fun to play with and it takes a bit of a nerdy streak in order to sniff them out and to construct them. Some palindromes, however, are so obvious and universal that we miss them altogether, and, in doing so, we miss the bigger meaning behind them.

One of the key examples is found here in Isaiah 6 where Isaiah has a vision of God in the temple. The angels attending the Lord flew about the Holy of Holies calling *Holy, holy, holy*, which is a word unit - read backward or forward - that nails the emphasis of what's going on here. The