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Ardelle and I were walking to a neighbor's house for dinner one night when my faith in God was shaken unexpectedly. Just a few feet away, in the narrow swath of grass between the sidewalk and the street, something dropped from the sky and landed with a thud—a thud that suggested it was about the size of a large zucchini squash and had been dropped from a pretty good height. When the zucchini looked up at us nervously and scampered back up the tree, we realized it was a squirrel. Now, even though squirrels tend to spend more time in trees than zucchinis, the odds of either one falling on your head are roughly the same. Squirrels are famously sure-footed creatures. Hence my crisis of faith. Let me explain.

Robert Farrar Capon wrote a lovely little book about the language of theology called *Hunting the Divine Fox*. And he began it with a story about an oyster who lived in the mud at the bottom of a tidal pool between a rock and a starfish. The oyster's self esteem was reasonably healthy in the beginning. In fact, it was almost smug when it considered the rock, a mere member of the mineral kingdom.

The oyster was perfectly happy until it learned that starfish had a very low opinion of oysters, making them the butts of what pass for ethnic jokes in the

underwater world and referring to them derisively as “nothing more than a rock with a stomach.”

This revelation sent the oyster into an angry sort of depression. He realized just how little he knew and wondered whether an oyster’s life was worth living at all. Soon he was in an existential crisis of Job-like proportions, and he cried out to God, “Let the day perish wherein I was spawned, and the night in which it was said, ‘A seed oyster has appeared’... Why do I live my days in doubt and darkness? O that one would hear me, and tell me openly of the glories above...”

And to the oyster’s astonishment, a voice from heaven answered, “All right, all right. But I have to make it short. It’s Friday afternoon.”

God goes on to tell the oyster that there is a whole world in which things can move themselves about, a world far beyond the starfish even. The oyster then hears about the magical realm of college basketball and the wondrous movement of young girls’ knees and prima ballerinas and squirrels. God tells the oyster that a squirrel hadn’t lost its footing since May 3rd, 1438.

Hence my own crisis of faith one evening when I was almost clocked by a falling squirrel. Capon’s little fable is meant to remind us that when we’re trying to conceive of God, we’re essentially oysters trying to imagine the movement of squirrels and ballerinas, wondering if there could be a world of creatures more mobile than even the starfish. Our language and experience will never quite be up to the task.

Robert Capon's story has long helped me think about how we think about God. But if squirrels actually do fall from trees, does the whole thing collapse? Should I rend my garments and sit with Job and the oyster in ashes, cursing the day of my birth too?

Sometimes the debates about the existence of God sound like a game of 'gotcha' in which the slip of one squirrel would bring the other side's argument crashing down right behind the poor creature limping off toward the ibuprofen bottle. But what can be most frustrating is that in spite of how certain everyone is that logic and rationality are on their side, the starting point for both sides is really something like, "Oh, come on! How can any sane person believe that God does/does not exist?"

So Christopher Hitchens says, "Thanks to the telescope and the microscope, [religion] no longer offers an explanation of anything important." A statement which even one agnostic philosopher says, "...is rather like saying that thanks to the electric toaster we don't need [the stories of] Chekov." Christianity and microscopes were never meant to answer the same questions.

But Christians in the debate are no better when they say that since there are reliable natural and moral orders in this world, there must be a creator. Therefore it only follows that an itinerant Jewish rabbi walked out of his tomb the third day after his crucifixion, proving that he was the second person of something called the Trinity, and that the scriptures in which we read about the

aforementioned resurrection are without error. It's all pretty straightforward, right?

This is the kind of nonsense we fall back into when we're smug enough to think that the world is an obvious place and that there's some airtight proof of my position that any fool should be able to understand.

Reading about the call of Isaiah on Trinity Sunday might be part of a remedy for this nonsense, because the story is so nonsensical. And a dollop of wonder and uncertainty might just be what our world needs right now. Or, to put it another way, maybe we could use a reminder that, when we try to talk about God, we are oysters, looking at starfish, trying to imagine a ballerina.

We're told that in the year that King Uzziah died, the prophet Isaiah had a vision. He saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of God's robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."

Isaiah confesses the uncleanness of his lips, so a seraph sears them with a hot coal and pronounces his sins forgiven. And in response to all this, the prophet says, "If someone needs to be sent, go ahead and send me."

Isaiah had a very strange and particular sort of call, and it started with this astonishing vision. So it seems like his story wouldn't have much to do with

ours. In fact, if you or I described a vision like his, we'd probably be asked about any recent changes in medication.

And let's face it. Aren't the special effects a bit much? Are they really necessary to the message? The seraphs, the throne, the enormous robe and the hot coal in the tongs? This is the kind of stuff Thomas Jefferson would have clipped right out of the Book of Isaiah if he'd gotten around to editing it too. Let's be reasonable.

There's also a sense in which Christian mission should be concerned, not with mystical visions, but with real and concrete needs in the lives of people around us—hunger and guilt and nakedness and hopelessness and alienation. There are plenty of places where sensible Christians can get to work right here in Memphis. Who has time for dreams and visions when there's something to be done? And in this practical, scientific age, shouldn't Christians stay reasonable if we're to stay relevant?

Well, I don't think even Isaiah would recommend abandoning reason altogether. But the bizarre details of his call might remind even us that the Christian faith begins not with a problem like sin or death that needs a logical solution. Faith begins with an encounter that demands a response. That's what it means to be sent in this story.

So maybe the first purpose of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is to keep us humble and open to a realm or an encounter with something or someone beyond the reach of our categories or our logic. Because if we believe that

nothing could lie beyond that reach, we're living like oysters who disbelieve in anything more mobile than starfish. We won't allow ourselves to believe in, or maybe we won't allow ourselves simply to stay present to, anything beyond what our small minds already understand.

And bound by what's rational, not only do we cut ourselves off from the possibility of a God who is beyond our imagination, we cut ourselves off from each other. We cut ourselves off from that person with an experience or a perspective that doesn't conform to the way I think things must obviously be.

Oddly enough then, if we hold it properly, something that the un-rational or the post-rational doctrine of the Trinity may help temper is our pride. And it may even help our work in the world flourish more fully.

When we baptize little Ruby in a few moments, we will pray that she receive the gift of joy and wonder in all God's works. It's a prayer we should probably never stop praying for each other. Because there's nothing like wonder with a dash of humility to loosen our grip on the truths we find so obvious and open our eyes to the possibility of something more.

The fact is that I still don't entirely know why singing the Gloria and saying the creed with all of you and receiving a sliver of bread and sip of wine in the context of this ancient liturgy orients me in this world like nothing else quite can. But it does. It just does. Which means it may be an encounter closer to Isaiah's strange call than to any rational explanation of God or goodness or justice or love.

So maybe when our worship comes to a close, when we've been blessed in the name of the Trinity and the deacon sends us forth into the world to do our work, well, maybe we do well to remember that that charge is more about being sent out from an encounter than being handed a checklist of what we're supposed to go do. We have seen and heard and tasted unnecessary and irrational and wonderful things in this place. We are oysters, I suppose. Humbler oysters, I hope, who may have caught an unexpected glimpse of the ballerina.

Wondering at the sight, knowing just how little we really know about her, maybe we'll leave the encounter with a little less smugness, with a little more kindness and joy, with a little more openness to what the next creature we meet in the tidal pool might actually need or hope for or have to offer back to the world.