

WHO GOD IS

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Carol Steen and I made a deal several years ago. Whenever we are going to sing “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!” in worship or Karla and Vera are going to play an arrangement, I am to notify Carol ahead of time. That way, Carol says, she’ll know to bring extra tissues to worship that day. That’s how meaningful the hymn is to her – and to many others.

Last Sunday morning, before worship, I told Carol we were going to sing “Holy, Holy, Holy!” this Sunday, even though we sang it just three weeks ago. “Carol,” I said, “next Sunday is Trinity Sunday, and there’s no way we can worship on Trinity Sunday without singing ‘Holy, Holy, Holy!’ -- “God in three persons, blessed Trinity!” Carol then told me she had recently received two separate emails from friends, both of which ended with reference to “the Father and the Son and in the hole he goes.”

Have you ever heard that story? It goes like this: While walking along the sidewalk in front of his church, a minister heard a child’s voice solemnly intoning a prayer. Apparently, his five-year-old son and his playmates had found a dead robin. Feeling that a proper burial should be performed, they found a small box and some cotton batting and put the bird’s body in the box. Then they dug a hole and got ready to bury the deceased. The minister’s son was chosen to say the appropriate prayers. With great dignity he prayed his version of what he thought his father always said: “Glory be unto the Faaaather..and unto the Sonnnn.....and into the hole he gooooes.”

[As an aside, I had one of those God wink moments as I emailed Carol to ask about sharing the “Holy, Holy, Holy!” story. While I was concentrating on emailing Carol and then looking for something in my papers, I had music playing Spotify on my computer. Suddenly I realized what was playing – a jazz arrangement of “Holy, Holy, Holy!” by Rick Gallagher!]

Today is Trinity Sunday on the church liturgical calendar. Trinity Sunday focuses on a doctrine of the church, rather than on an event such as the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. As described on the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Mission website, “It celebrates the unfathomable mystery of God’s being as Holy Trinity. It is a day of adoration and praise of the one, eternal, incomprehensible God. The triune God is the basis of all we are and do as Christians.”¹

In many ways, preaching on Trinity Sunday is a daunting task. After all, preaching on a doctrine hardly seems as exciting as preaching from a gospel story. And then there is the whole challenge of trying to steer away from “explaining the Trinity,” although many scholars and preachers (including me) have attempted to do just that

over the years. Many times you end up violating that cardinal rule – “When you find yourself in a hole, stop digging!” Why, even the great Methodist theologian Charles Wesley had this to say about understanding the Trinity – “Bring me a worm that can comprehend a man, and then I will show you a man that can comprehend the Triune God.”

That’s the thing about God, isn’t it? Because God has made himself known to us through his Son Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, we can’t help but want to know God better – or at least to describe who God is. But, whenever we try to describe God with our human language, we inevitably come up short.

The great writer T.S. Eliot is probably best known today for writing the poetry collection on which Andrew Lloyd Weber based his Broadway musical “Cats.” Eliot had a conversion experience in 1927 from Unitarianism to Anglicanism. He described his religious views as a combination of "a Catholic cast of mind, a Calvinist heritage, and a Puritanical temperament."² His religious faith played an important role in his later writings and poetry. From 1936-1943, Eliot published what he considered to be his most significant work and what many consider to be his masterpiece, a collection of poems called “Four Quartets.” The poems deal with questions of life and death, time and eternity, the incarnation, and spiritual revelation. The poems have been described as the poet’s clearest exposition of his Christian beliefs.

In the first poem (“Burnt Norton”), Eliot writes about the limits of our human comprehension and language when it comes to knowing God. You can hear his biblical allusions in his description:

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still. Shrieking voices
Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering,
Always assail them. The Word in the desert
Is most attacked by voices of temptation,
The crying shadow in the funeral dance,
The loud lament of the disconsolate chimera.

So it is when we try to explain and rationalize the concept of God-the-Three-in-One – “our words strain, crack and sometimes break, under the burden.” And yet we persist – and we raise our voices to sing “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!” and we baptize “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Why do we do it? We do it because God has made himself known to us as Three-in-One, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – not to make our lives hard, not to confuse our minds, not to hide from us behind some incomprehensible doctrine. And, because God has made himself known to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, he has revealed who God is.

As has been said, “If this is God, then thus is God.” Think about that for a minute. The disciples were faithful Jews, raised on the bedrock belief of “the Lord our God, the Lord alone.” And yet, when they came to know Jesus, saw who he was and what he was

about, and began to trust that, indeed, in Jesus of Nazareth God was dwelling, they could have said, "If this is God, then thus is God." When the disciples experienced the rush of the mighty wind and the flames of fire on Pentecost and felt the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives to be Jesus' witnesses "to the ends of the earth," they could have said, "If this is God, then thus is God."

In other words, even if there isn't a fully developed doctrine of the Trinity anywhere in the New Testament (much less the Bible as a whole), our foundational belief in God-the-Three-in-One has its deep roots in the relationship God chose to have with his people (and continues to have with his people) as a God who creates, who cares, who redeems, who saves, and who calls us to walk with him in the paths of righteousness and to take the good news with us wherever we go. One person has rightly said that the idea of the Trinity is not optional, because it describes the very nature of God. It is who God is.

You might have heard the story about the Kindergarten teacher who was walking around the classroom observing the students while they were drawing. She stopped at the desk of one little girl who was working hard on her drawing. The teacher watched for a minute, then asked what the girl was drawing. The girl replied, "I'm drawing God." The teacher paused and said, "But no one knows what God looks like." Without missing a beat, or looking up from her drawing, the girl replied, "They will in a minute."

I don't know that I'm quite as confident as that little Kindergarten girl, but I am confident in saying that the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – tells us who God is. Actually, it is more correct – and more personally meaningful and relevant – to say that the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – **shows** us who God is. For you see, at its heart, the doctrine of the Trinity is all about love and relationship. If that still sounds too philosophical, think about it this way – the doctrine of the Trinity is our very human attempt to describe in words – words that sometimes crack and strain and even break under the burden – the majesty and glory and grace and mercy and self-giving love and awesome power we have come to know through God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

One Presbyterian theologian has summed up the importance of the Trinity in our lives, not in technical theological language, but in terms of what we believe when times are hard. How particularly relevant his words are right now:

"When dramatic events occur in our lives, we find out what we really believe. When our hopes are crushed, or when we reflect on an enormous tragedy such as the tsunami [today we would say the coronavirus pandemic and the boiling over of racial tensions], we discover which parts of the creeds and confessions we recite in church are essential to our lives. What guides our faith in such situations? How do we bring comfort and hope to others? What do we really believe?"

"The Apostle Paul might have said: 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who consoles us in all our affliction, for just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so our consolation is abundant through Christ, sealed in our hearts through the power and constant presence of the Holy Spirit' (2 Corinthians 1:3–5, 21–22).

"John Calvin might have said: 'Christ is not only the pledge of our adoption, but God also gives us the Holy Spirit as a witness to this adoption, through whom we may

freely cry aloud, “Abba, Father.” Whenever we are distressed, remember to ask for the presence of the Spirit who will enable us to pray boldly’ (Institutes, III.20.37).

“But we might say: ‘Be comforted, for God is always with you.’”³ Which is exactly the promise Jesus makes in the very last verse of Matthew’s gospel – “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20) That is the same promise the angel brought to Joseph in a dream back at the beginning of Matthew’s gospel: “All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us.’” (Matthew 1:22-23)

Think about that! In all of life, and especially when times are hard, God is with us – through the presence of the risen Lord Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. God isn’t present with us as a philosophical ideal or a generic natural force or an unknowable deity. God is with us, *always* with us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is with us when we are sent out to make disciples of all nations, when we baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and when we teach people all that Jesus has shown us about who God is.

The heart of the Trinity is relationship and love. And it is from that relationship and love that Jesus gives us our commission as his disciples. Robert Cornwall writes, “Our calling, our commission, then, is to draw others into this relationship. We preach, we disciple, we baptize, and in the course of this work, God draws humanity into God’s self, transforming all – and this is a task that transcends time as we know it. But the promise is there, Jesus will be present with us and to us to the end of the age.”⁴

Thank God for the Trinity, for knowing who God is as we seek to respond faithfully to his call. Thank God that as he sends us out to do God’s work, we go with the promise that God the Three-in-One is always with us.

Let me finish today’s sermon with another lectionary poem by Andrew King, called “The Commissioned.” As you listen to the words, be reminded of who God is – and who God is calling us to be.

THE COMMISSIONED

I.

At first it feels like a circle closed,
a journey completed,
this reminder of the mountain where
Peter, James and John saw the Lord transfigured,
speaking with Elijah and Moses,
the voice that thundered from the enclosing cloud
filling the disciples with fear.
It is Christ himself who speaks to us here,
the Lord crucified and now resurrected,
proclaiming his authority, and for a moment
the apostles might be tempted
to think the mission, surely, is accomplished,
goal achieved: God reigning through Christ;
and perhaps the eleven look around the peak

to see if Moses and Elijah will again appear
for congratulatory clasps of the hand.

But the circle has not closed; the journey
has not finished, it is open-ended
as the arching sky and as the road below
that leads to the distant horizon; open
as the mission that here Christ gives us,
as the promise he makes to be always with us,
from now to the end of days.
For disciples must be made
in and from every nation,
taught Christ's ways and words and sent
anew to serve the men and women of the earth.

II.

See how the slanting sun, moving across
these Galilean hills, takes its seat on the rim
of the wider world, inviting our eyes
to seek, not the shades of prophets past,
but the shimmer of the new world to come.
See how, as we lift our heads in the gaze
that follows Christ's lifting from the earth,
we discover no mystifying cloud,
nor faces from only scriptural glory.
Rather see the shapes of the yet-to-be
appearing in the echoes of his words:

There we see Paul, in conversation with Peter;
and there is Barnabas, and Phoebe, and Lydia
speaking with Thomas, who will travel to India;
we can see Boniface, and Patrick, and Columba,
standing beside Francis and John and Charles;
a little further over: Dorothy Ripley who laboured
for slaves in America; Mary Slessor, who served
so faithfully in Nigeria; Elizabeth Fry, who
did her work close to home; just a few
among hosts of other men and women
come to this summit, hearts receiving
Christ's commission for them; whose
long shadows shine, but in whose shadow –

look, just over here – stands another
familiar figure who, like them, will be helping

to re-shape the world
that so needs our obedience to Christ's love:

III.
Yes.
It is you.⁵

Let us pray: Loving God, we are limited in our understanding of you, but we know that you care for us and for all creation. Thank you for loving us and remaining with us in our sorrows and joys. Thank you for the life of Jesus whose life shows us the way to life and happiness and trust. Thank you for your Spirit who leads us. Warm our hearts and unite us, that we might open our lives to you to accept all your love and to respond to it by entrusting ourselves to you with all that you have made us and given us. We ask this in the name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.

NOTES

¹“Trinity Sunday,” at www.presbyterianmission.org.

²“T.S. Eliot,” at [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T. S. Eliot](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T._S._Eliot).

³ Charles Wiley, “Reclaiming the Trinity,” at www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/reclaiming-the-trinity/

⁴Robert D. Cornwall, June 10, 2014, “Time to Get Going – Lectionary Reflection for Trinity Sunday (Year A),” at www.bobcornwall.com/2014/06/time-to-get-going-lectionary-reflection.html

⁵ Andrew King, “Poem For The Sunday Lectionary (Trinity Sunday), “The Commissioned (Matthew 28:16-20),” at www.earth2earth.wordpress.com/2014/06/08/poem-for-the-sunday-lectionary-trinity-sunday/