

Holy Trinity B 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

May 30, 2021

John 3:1-17; Isaiah 6:1-8

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

During Lent this spring I received an email from a Californian who used to worship with us at Dove of Peace when he would stay in Tucson for caregiving purposes. In his email, he mentioned that one of my sermons one time on a Trinity Sunday had a profound effect on him. In the sermon I had said that we human beings will never fully understand the Trinity in this life. He said that my words that morning took a huge load off his shoulders and allowed him to have faith. This man is a good Christian, a practicing and observant Lutheran for many decades, maybe for all of his life. He's smart, he's faithful. And it struck me that no one had ever really made it clear to him that the Trinity is a mystery. Not an Agatha Christie mystery, not a Sherlock Holmes mystery. But a mystery in the theological sense, the church sense, of something that defies human understanding.

I believe that the Trinity is an ancient invitation to know God more deeply. But it has been used in modern times as a hammer. The ancient Trinity should be a comfort to those of us who don't know all the answers. But it has been used by Christians— and certainly by Lutherans— to define the “one true faith” over and against all other kinds of faith. And the California man who sent me the email had maybe had too much exposure to the kind of church talk which uses the Trinity as a hammer.

And if you have the service folder, I printed two different prayers of the day that are often used on Trinity Sunday. One, which is in use in Lutheran churches, speaks of the true faith. And prays that we will be kept steadfast in this true faith against all adversities. So it's drawing lines. The Trinity is the true faith. We need to stay in this true faith over and against our enemies, and with luck, we will reach the prize of heaven.

In the service folder, I also printed the Athanasian Creed, attributed to the church father Athanasius, but probably had nothing to do with him. And the Athanasian Creed is great for teaching, but it begins and ends with a statement that you must believe this— all of it, perfectly, without any fudging or crossing your fingers— you must believe this or else you will go to hell. I have been in Lutheran churches that recite this on Trinity Sunday. It's nearly three pages long. *“Thus the Father is Lord; the Son is Lord; the Holy Spirit is Lord: And yet there are not three lords, but one Lord. As Christian truth compels us to acknowledge each distinct person as God and Lord, so catholic religion forbids us to say that there are three gods or lords.”* It's a lot of five dollar words, and if you don't get it all right, you're going to hell.

So I think that the doctrine of the Trinity frequently gets invoked by idiots who don't understand theology or appreciate faith. And I resent when they attempt to intimidate other Christians with their pompous pronouncements. That doesn't mean that I don't believe in the Trinity. It's my favorite thing. I love the Trinity. It's how I know God. It's how I experience God. But it's an invitation to meet God. It's an invitation to know God. It's not a hammer, it's not a stick or a club for pummeling others.

Be aware, men and women, that the word "Trinity" is not in the Bible. That is certainly a fact which ought to make any serious Christian take some time to think long and hard. Be aware, men and women, that in our gospel reading today, Jesus did not say that *"God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever professes the doctrine of the Trinity will not perish but have eternal life."* No, Jesus stated that belief in him is the door that opens eternal life for us. But Jesus also said in today's gospel, "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit... The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." So Jesus is talking about the Spirit. We've been reading from this gospel of John about the Spirit for a few weeks, and Jesus said last week that the Spirit had not yet come. And yet, in today's reading, much earlier in the same gospel, Jesus speaks of the Spirit as something that is already present. So there is already some mystery in John's gospel, in which past, present, and future have no meaning, and things of God are eternal in the strict sense of that word: outside of time. The normal sequence of time does not apply. And that's true of the Trinity, as well. It's a *mystery* in that the rules that apply to us and to our way of thinking do not necessarily apply to God. So the word Trinity is not in the Bible. And the Bible itself does not feel obligated to subject God to human logic. These truths serve as reminders to me to not get too grandiose or judgmental in my own pronouncements about God.

When Moses asked God for his name at the burning bush, God gave him the four consonants without vowels that we call the Tetragrammaton. Which is sometimes transliterated as Yahweh, or poorly transliterated as Jehovah. When you see the letters L-O-R-D all in small capital letters, as happens eighteen times in our psalm today, it is that mysterious *Yahweh*, which seems to mean *I will be who I will be*. Or *I am who I will be*. Or *Quit asking me questions, punk, because I answer to no one*.

The Old Testament has many names for God. Yahweh is one. In our reading from Isaiah this morning, the seraphs refer to him as Yahweh. But twice, Isaiah himself uses the term Adonai. The Lord. But it's a plural name, the plural form of *Adon*. And another widely used Old Testament name for God is *Elohim*. Which is the plural form of *Eloah*. The word from which Arabic derives *Allah*. So there is a linguistic distinction in which Islam's *Allah* is singular. Judaism's *Elohim* is plural. And in the famous words of Genesis, *Elohim* says, "Let us make man [let us make humankind] in our image, according to our likeness." Using the royal we, the first person plural. In our image.

So the God of the Old Testament has many names, many expressions. Some of them already plural. This is the God who told Moses that Moses would die if he saw God's face, so he arranged for Moses to see only the back of him. [Exodus 33:19-23] This is the God who, in our first lesson this morning, shakes the foundations of the temple and fills it with smoke and causes a terrified Isaiah to declare, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips." This is a terrifying and powerful God. A God whose face Moses cannot see and whose name Isaiah cannot utter. Isaiah could only see the hem of God's robe.

And yet... in our second reading today, Paul speaks of Christians crying out "Abba! Father!" Meaning that we are speaking to the God of Moses and Isaiah and Genesis with a term of endearment. Daddy. Papa. Abba. So the triune God— Father, Son, and Holy Spirit— makes it possible for us to have an intimate, tender, trusting relationship with the same God who our psalm says today "breaks the cedar trees" of Lebanon, shakes the wilderness, and makes the mountains buck like rodeo animals. This, to me, is what the Trinity is about. The Trinity is an ancient invitation to know God more deeply. Not a theological hammer for banging and beating on others.

In the service folder, I printed two prayers. The traditional one which speaks of the true faith, and the adversities, and the desire to keep and teach the one true faith. And I also printed the one that today's Roman Catholics use on Trinity Sunday, a prayer which is also quite old. *Father, you sent your Word to bring us truth and your Spirit to make us holy. Through them we come to know the mystery of your life. Help us to worship you, one God in three Persons, by proclaiming and living our faith in you. Amen.* It's a prayer that mentions Jesus as the Word of truth, and mentions the Holy Spirit as the sanctifier, and says that through Jesus and the Holy Spirit we come to know the mystery of God's life. I think that's quite eloquent. An invitation not to understand God. But an invitation to know the life of God. The mystery of the life of God. A Spirit who blows where it chooses and we hear the sound of it, but we do not know where it comes from or where it goes. An Abba— a daddy, a papa— who dandles us on his lap. A voice that breaks the cedars of Lebanon. A smoky enormous deity in the temple, who keeps monstrous seraphs for his pets. A Son who has come into the cosmos, not to condemn the cosmos, but in order that the cosmos might be saved.

This is the Trinity. This is the invitation. To be part of the life of God. The mystery that never quits surprising us. The unknowable and unnameable force that still walks beside us as a friend. Amen.