
MAJESTY AND MYSTERY
TRINITY SUNDAY 2024
A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, MAY 26, 2024
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It's Trinity Sunday. Perhaps that means little to you other than that the bright red frontal of Pentecost Sunday is back to white again before we move to long season of green. Or maybe it meant that you knew there'd be a trinitarian icon on the worship guide, and we'd sing "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty" as one of our songs. I know that for many pastors and preachers, Trinity Sunday evokes one of Isaiah's responses when he encountered God in the temple. It's either, "Woe is me!" or "Here am I. Send me (on vacation so I don't have to preach this Sunday)." Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that's what the Dean did today, but... In many ways, every Sunday is a "Trinity Sunday" of sorts because we celebrate, worship, and honor the God who has been revealed to us as Trinity. Yet, by calling today "Trinity Sunday" we have an invitation to look deeper into the majesty and mystery of the Triune God to whom scripture and the church have borne witness through the ages.

What is daunting about such an invitation, and what might evoke a "woe is me" response from preachers (but hopefully not congregants who are listening to them), is not only the intellectual challenge of explaining what Christians have tried to say is true about God, but it's also the recognition that all speech about God is limited, fragile, and fallible because it is human. Often, we like to speak in certainties, with declarative statements and commands. But on a Sunday like today we, both preachers and parishioners alike, remember that all our God talk—all our theology—is moving in the direction of a God whose majesty is infinite and whose mystery is without end. To recognize this, is to recognize that God is not in our control, not made in our image, not a projection of our best ideals, not limited to our understanding or comprehension, not something we can get to the bottom of, not someone that we can box in or hold down—and even when we tried to nail God down to the cross and box God in to the tomb, Jesus got up. In remembering this, hopefully we recognize that the best posture when speaking of or to God is the humble posture of prayer: where in body and/or spirit our knees are bent, head bowed, hands open, neck exposed, all at the mercy of a good God. To speak of the Triune God is doxological prayer, that is to say it is an act of worship; it is giving voice to the praise of God.

On Trinity Sunday, we take part in the church's history of asking the question, if God has come among us in Israel's Christ, in Jesus, what must be true about who God is? Or to put it another way, what shape does God have to be for God to be among us in Christ? And how does God revealing who God is in this way, shape our life with God and each other?

It's a potential challenge for us who typically turn to scripture to find our answers about God that the doctrine of the Trinity does not come from any particular biblical text. In the Bible, you won't find the words Trinity, Triune, Three-in-One, One-in-Three, or many of the theological terms the church has used through time to express the mystery of God revealed in Jesus. Yet, the doctrine of the Trinity is thoroughly biblical. In fact, the church arrived at this doctrine because it

wrestled with and insisted on the truth that the God revealed through the entirety of scripture, the Old and New Testament alike, is the one and same God, who came fully in Jesus.

As directly as any of the Gospels, John's Gospel speaks of Jesus as one with God. In John's Gospel, we hear Jesus say things like, "I and the Father are one" (10:30), and "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (14:9), and "No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man" (3:13). The early church knew that followers of Jesus had been worshiping Jesus from the earliest of days. Now unless they wanted to say Jesus's followers had been idolatrous in their worship, because they worshipped a creature instead of the creator, they had to maintain that Jesus was fully God and fully human—the Son of God and the Son of Man. They reasoned that if it is true that Jesus is both fully God and fully human, and not simply a demi-God, then there has to be some way of speaking about God not simply as multiple but as one. They also reasoned that if when Jesus called God "Father" and himself the "Son" he was pointing to real distinctions within God, then there must be some way of speaking about God not only as one but also as multiple. From this, and much lengthier debates, the church settled on the language of three persons in one substance. Christians through the centuries have certainly found that there are pitfalls at every turn for how to talk about God, such as opportunities to overemphasize unity of God at the expense of diversity in God, and vice-versa. It may be easy for us to assume that these problems, things that eventually were called heretical, are only intellectual, but the church saw them as threatening not only our thinking about God but our very relationship with God and each other. To put it another way, the church believed these problems threatened the very purpose of humanity, which as one catechism puts it is "to worship God and enjoy God forever." It's true that at times we in the church have wrestled with how to maintain a sense of the mystery of who God is that is greater and more infinite than what has been revealed to us. It is also true that Christians have insisted that the God revealed through salvation history shows us the truth about who God truly is. The theological formulation for this is that the immanent Trinity (God in eternity) is revealed in the economic Trinity (God in history). We can authentically encounter the reality of who God is in eternity through who God is in history.

Now let's briefly consider the three texts we've read this morning to see what each of these tell us about the life of God as revealed in salvation history. I'm sorry in advance to my homiletics and biblical professors who trained me better than to preach on three texts on the same Sunday. But on a day where we're celebrating our three-in-one God, I might have some leeway to preach from three texts in one sermon.

Isaiah 6 describes a holy, and wholly other, God who comes in a particular time and place in history and encounters humanity. Isaiah describes it like this, "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him... And one called to another and said: Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." Saying, "in the year that King Uzziah died" is like saying to someone, "Remember where you were when you heard that John F. Kennedy or Martin Luther King, Jr. were killed? Or remember where you were when you learned of the planes crashing into the Twin Towers in New York?" The year King Uzziah died was a monumental shift for the history and reality of the people of Israel. It was a shift in power from a king and kingdom they had

known to one that was uncertain. Right in the middle of this uncertainty Isaiah has this vision, this encounter, with God. And what Isaiah sees is overwhelming in its majesty and glory. The God revealed to Isaiah is so majestic that a place as holy and glorious as the temple could not even hold the hem of God's robe. And what's more, in Isaiah's vision God is accompanied by hosts of heaven who declare God's holiness—that God is set apart, wholly other, distinct from God's creation. Yet, they also proclaim that the whole earth, the good creation, is filled with God's glory. God is entirely distinct from God's good creation, nevertheless that creation speaks of God's glory. Isaiah's vision declares that God is beyond human reality and comprehension and containment. This truth inspired Isaiah to respond by saying, "Woe is me!" Reverence, awe, and recognition of our own feeble reality are fitting responses to the God Isaiah saw.

In the Gospel lesson from John today, Jesus references each of the persons of the Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I want to highlight three vital truths that Christians have discovered about the Holy Trinity to which this passage points. The first is: God is a relationship. On a Trinity Sunday more than a decade ago, Sam Wells, the former Dean of the Chapel put it like this:

God is a relationship. God is a relationship of three persons, so wonderfully shaped towards one another, so wondrously with one another, that we call them one, but so exquisitely diverse and distinct within that unity that we call them three.¹

Perhaps some of you will also remember a story Stephen Hawking tells in his *A Brief History of Time* that Sam shared on that day. The story goes like this:

A well-known scientist (some say it was Bertrand Russell) once gave a public lecture on astronomy. He described how the earth orbits around the sun and how the sun, in turn, orbits around the center of a vast collection of stars called our galaxy. At the end of the lecture, a little old lady at the back of the room got up and said: "What you have told us is rubbish. The world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise." The scientist gave a superior smile before replying, "What is the tortoise standing on?" "You're very clever, young man, very clever," said the old lady. "But it's turtles all the way down!"²

That's how it is with God. With the Trinity, it is relationships all the way down. While some might list God's relationship status as "it's complicated," we can confidently say: it's Triune. The Trinity is a succinct way of saying that God *is* the relationship of God the Father with the Son and the Spirit, *and* the relationship of God the Son with the Father and the Spirit, *and* the relationship of God the Spirit with the Father and the Son, and nothing else. (See why we prefer saying "Trinity.") The infinite mystery of these relationships is the infinite mystery of who God is.

The second truth related to this passage is linked to the first: The essence of these relationships within God is self-giving love that always moves toward the other. The Trinity is a self-emptying fellowship of love, where in giving themselves to each other, the three never lose their distinctiveness. These three move interdependently in perfect relationship with each other.

¹ Sam Wells, "Everything's Relative," <https://chapel-archives.oit.duke.edu/documents/June19EverythingRelative.pdf>

² Ibid.

The fancy theological term for this is perichoresis. Some people like to think of it as a divine dance, where the three move in and through one another without losing their own individuality.

The third truth connects to the first two: because of their self-giving relating to one another, every person of the Trinity is always and forever marked by the cross. God sending God's Son in love to give eternal life—life in communion with God forever—marked the very life of God all the way down. If it is relationship all the way down in God, then it is relationship marked by the sacrificial love of the cross all the way down. The shape of the cross is seared in the heart of the Triune God. In his life, ministry, and death, the Son's movement to the broken, the lost, the least, the left out, the poor, the marginalized, the dead, and the damned, and the Son's embrace of sinners, of the unclean, the impure, the reviled, and the despised reveal that the life of the Triune God is always and forever marked by relationships with people who find themselves in these very positions.

In Romans 8, (and I'll be brief here), the final scripture passage assigned today, we get a window into how all this talk about the Trinity impacts us in the most concrete ways. Paul says to the Roman church, "For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons and daughters by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'" (NASB20) Paul reminds the Roman church and reminds us today that the most beautiful thing is that God decided that God's self-giving, moving-toward-others love, wasn't simply for the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but was for relationship with us, too. You see, by the Spirit, we are invited to participate in the self-giving, love-outpouring, intimate life of God. Like the icon on the cover of the bulletin, the open seat at the table draws us in to the life of the Trinity, that is rich, and intimate, and nourishing. You see, God so loved the world that God decided to include us in the Divine dance, in the fellowship of the Triune God, in the life of God through Jesus by the power of the Spirit.

Some theologians call this Participation in the divine life "theosis." Through the Spirit, we are joined with Christ into the life of God, changing us more and more into the image and likeness of Christ. As those on our way to God, in intimate fellowship with the Holy Trinity, we are shaped by relationship with God and the Trinity's relationship within itself. We are formed by our union with the Holy Trinity who demonstrates perfect relationship through self-giving, self-emptying love. And because that love is cross shaped all the way down, going ever to the marginalized and oppressed, so too will our love as we become more like God. It's Trinity Sunday, and what that means is the glory of participating in life with God is for us all. Amen.