

The Wonder of the Triune God

Genesis 1

Psalms 8

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

Matthew 28:16-20

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Trinity Sunday

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A few weeks ago on Memorial Day weekend, Gayle and I went up to Nashville after church to help our daughter Catherine move out of her dorm room and into an old Victorian house she is going to share with five girls as she moves from being an undergraduate to a graduate student in nursing. While there, I took a brief break from moving furniture to take a bike ride on the Greenway, a beautifully developed walking and biking path along what was an old railroad track bed in West Nashville. It is a wonderful area, out in the wild, in the midst of the city, somewhat like the walking, biking path along Mountain Brook Parkway. As I rode along, I was constantly hearing the prominent sound of the cicada, who fill the air throughout that region of Middle Tennessee. They are everywhere in that area this year. Besides hearing their distinctive buzz, similar to that of a locust, I was constantly having these strange creatures flying into my face, and if I was not careful, into my mouth.

The Cicada make their distinctive sound by contracting the internal tymbal muscles so as to produce a clicking noise amplified by the substantially hollow abdomen of the male cicada, creating a resonance that can be as high as 120 decibels at close range. Only the male cicada make this sound as they seek to mate with females during their short 13 year lifespan in adult form when we hear and encounter them. I learned recently that these cicada in the Tennessee area this summer are called the magi cicada, one of literally hundreds of different varieties of cicada. Across Africa over 400 varieties are found.

As these cicada make their clicking music, they are the result of a very complex gestation process. Female magi cicada lay up to six hundred eggs. Then after seven weeks, as those eggs hatch, the nymphs bore down beneath the ground between a foot to eight feet deep in the dark soil where they remain for the next 13 years. In May of the 13th year, when the soil is warm enough, they begin to tunnel their way up to the surface, and find some upright structures, such as trees, posts and even weeds on which to molt. The new adult cicadas emerge in a matter of hours and take flight to start the 13 year life cycle all over again. The whole process is amazing and points, for people of faith, to yet another sign of the awe and wonder and mystery of the Creating God, such that we sing out, as we will later today, "My God how great Thou art!"ⁱ

Today is Trinity Sunday. This is an unusual day in that it is specifically dedicated to remembering a theological doctrine. The Trinity is the essential awesome wondrous shorthand expression emerging from the Bible itself and the experience of early Christian believers that later developed into the complex doctrine of the Holy Trinity, three Persons in the One God, One God manifesting himself in three distinct Persons as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Trinity is our attempt to explain who God is and how God works. The Trinity is impossible arithmetic, which confounds Jews and Muslims, who think we are worshipping three separate Gods. Yet for Christians the Trinity reflects the marvelous and mysterious way that God is present and living in relationship with us. A simple analogy - think of water - which has 3 forms - solid, liquid, gas,

ice, water and steam. In recent years among theologians there has been a vast recovery of Trinitarian logic and expression. Every aspect of our faith is begun, surrounded, sustained and concluded in the reality and expression of the Trinity. Yesterday, Paul Derrick and Mandy Buck made their marriage vows, in the morning we baptized Charles Weinacker Montgomery III, this in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. On Tuesday, we commended to God's eternal keeping his child, Beverley Finch, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We baptize our children, seal our marriage vows, begin and end our worship and bury our dead, in the name of the Triune God, Father, and Holy Spirit. Thus we have our identity as followers of Jesus Christ. The very first and most comprehensive ordination vow elders, deacons and ministers are asked and required to affirm is,

Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?"ⁱⁱ

The doctrine of the Trinity helps protect the God of the Bible from being trivialized into a golden calf in our own image, a generic American god, a Mac God, or a Man Upstairs sort of weak and flexible human-concocted deity.

One observer noted that the division in the religious house is not between liberals and conservatives but between those following the transcendent revealed God and those following the god of our own making.

“One faith worships a transcendent God, wholly Other, whose thoughts are not our thoughts and whose ways are not our ways, who revealed Himself preeminently and absolutely in Jesus Christ, and who declares His will for humanity in his written, holy, authoritative Word.

The other faith worships a god of its own making, a nature god, a humankind writ large god, a god of ideological energy, a god of politics, a god of sentiment. Being everywhere, this god is nowhere. Being inclusive of everything, it stands for nothing and can therefore allow anything.

John Trapp said in the 16th Century, “Seest thou another man shipwrecked? Look well to thy moorings.”

It is in order to shore up our moorings in this God, whose blessed name is Trinity, and who likes his name, that we offer our praise and thanksgiving in Christian worship, and that we focus upon today.

My teacher of theology at Princeton Seminary, Daniel Migliore writes in his book Faith Seeking Understanding, that “The Trinity is a way of understanding the history of God’s love for the world. It originates from the Father, is humanly enacted for the world in the Son, and becomes present, vital, passionate reality through the Holy Spirit.” Migliore concludes, “It is not too strong to say that with the doctrine of the Trinity, Christianity either stands or falls.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Our texts today are far ranging. They begin with the Genesis 1, the Creation of the universe, the earth, and all life, this marvelous mysterious poetic expression, which by the way follows generally along with more scientific modern expressions of life development, culminating in the glorious conclusion of the Creation with man and woman, and the exultant affirmation, “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed it was very good.”^{iv}

Psalms 8 celebrates this glorious God, sovereign over creation, “O Lord our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth. Out of the mouths of babes and infants, you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger. When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” Yet God has made us but a little lower than God, and crowned us with glory and honor. God delights in us and God cares for us.

Matthew 28, in these final words the resurrected Christ Jesus on the Mountain at the very end of this Gospel, sends the apostles forth to their work of spreading the Good News and baptizing and growing up disciples, “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” It is thus in the pattern of this Creator Father God, this Redeemer Son, Lord and Savior of the world, and this Energizing, Enlightening, Empowering Holy Spirit that we are to go forth, and undertake our ministry, fulfill our mission, and live our lives.

Thus at the end of his second letter to the Church at Corinth, a letter dealing with a number of practical daily living matters for the Christian community, from taking up the offering to dealing with the experience of suffering, that the Apostle Paul concludes with this beautiful Trinitarian benediction, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”

My point in all of these scriptures from creation to conclusion, on this Father’s Day as we remember our earthly fathers, and this Trinity Sunday as we delve into the meaning and mystery of our heavenly Father, is that the Trinity is not simply some early church fabrication that is beyond our experiencing today. I really cannot explain the math of it to you, but I can tell you that the Trinity, like the Cicada, represents in shorthand form the vastness of our mysterious God. “How Great Thou Art!” The Trinity reflects the experience men and women encountered with the Living God as recorded in the Scriptures, and expresses this specific God who in his inner nature and his revealed nature, of holy love, is three in one and one in three.

I

The Trinity begs for three points, don’t you think? Well, in the first place, **The Trinity Tells Us Who God Is.** This is the God of relationship whose inner being is relational God within God’s own being. Then this is revealed as God makes himself known to us. We call him God in One Being with three natures. This God comes to his people to save. In our text from Genesis we hear God saying, “Let us make humankind in our image.” This has been understood through history as God speaking in the plural internally, referring to the presence and joint work

of the Creating Father, the Redeeming Son and the Empowering Holy Spirit, from the very beginning.

Some in recent times have objected to the masculine Father image and prefer only those clarifying adjectives turned into nouns of – creator, redeemer, and sustainer, sometimes this is because of an inadequate father they experienced in their own lives. Sometimes because of sensing an exclusion of the mother role in creation, who arguably does the heavy carrying and lifting! And God is often referred to as “like a mother” in the Hebrew scriptures.

No doubt these texts were written in times of male patriarchies. Yet there is more to it. We call God Father, not because God is male as opposed to female. Either exclusive of the other too narrowly reduces the Creator and King, who Jesus called Father, and to whom Jesus related as Son, and taught us, in his model prayer, to call and address and pray to as “Our Father.” We are privileged to call God Father because Jesus is God’s Son, and through his engrafting work on the Cross, adopts us into the family so we too, because of Jesus can call God Father. This Creator God we call Father, through the non-sexual agency of a woman named Mary, brought forth in human flesh the man named Jesus. Jesus was fully human and fully divine. Alvin Kimel says, “To replace the Trinitarian formula” (of Father, Son and Holy Spirit with a generic formula like Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer) “is to repudiate the creed, the Church and the God of our baptism. God has incarnated himself in time and space... the theological consequences of this confession are revolutionary.” We call God Father not because God is sexual but because God is personal. The Trinity tells us who God is.

II

The Trinity, in the second place, shows us **How God Works**. There is distinction between Father, Son, and Spirit, as we look at the Biblical Story. Yet these distinctions are not isolated and autonomous, but interpenetrating. Thus Jesus prays to the Father, and the Father works in Jesus. Thus the Spirit empowers Jesus at every moment of earthly life. Thus while Jesus is the primary person of God suffering on the cross, Jesus does not suffer apart from the Father, but the Father suffers with the Son, and likewise bears the reproach people heap on him.

Like a human father working to correct his wayward child, even so the Apostle Paul works, in his second letter to the Church at Corinth, to correct their divisions and their lack of progress in the faith. Yet after some sharp rebukes through that letter, Paul concludes lovingly with that apostolic benediction, “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” In the middle of a troubled church, then and now, God makes himself known in this way, and prays for grace, love and communion to be at work among the people, even as they are within the inner being and mystery of God. Grace, love and communion are thus to be at work among and between us, God’s people the Church. The Trinity shows how God works.

III

Finally, in the Third place, the Trinity actually **Links Us to This Mysterious God With Us**. The Trinity is the cohesive glue, holding these diverse aspects of God together. Holding us

together in all the struggles and suffering we move through in life. Showing us something of the dancing pattern of living moving atoms and molecules, as scientist Richard Feynman pondered in the quote on the front of the bulletin, how God internally dances. Theologian Robert Jenson says, “Without the Trinity, our ‘liberalism’ and our ‘conservatism’ are but the atheist and superstitious branches of the same capitulation before a dead universe.” For instance, without the Holy Spirit, the Father and the Son may have done all that ever needs doing for the universe. But it is only the Holy Spirit that brings that saving reconciling event home to where we live in the universe.” One simple yet profound reminder I learned in Sunday school about how to pray is this, Pray to the Father, Through the Son, In the Power of the Holy Spirit.”

Athanasius, and early Church Father of the fourth century A.D., who helped develop the Trinitarian theology expressed with delight, “I cannot think on the one without quickly being encircled by the splendor of the three; nor can I discern the three without being straightway carried back to the one.” Thankfully, there simply is no way getting round the Trinity.

Jonathan Edwards, great colonial American preacher, revivalist, President of Princeton University, was America’s most renowned theologian to this day. He was profoundly Trinitarian in his thinking and expressions. They said Edwards was the one most responsible, in 18th century New England, for holding back the encroachment of Deism through his vital Trinitarianism. At the heart of his fertile thought was the understanding that God as Trinity is “the supreme harmony of all.” Edwards saw that it is only because God is Triune that God’s reality can be morally and religiously decisive. Only because God is triune does he make a practical difference in our daily lives.

In the early 5th century A.D. a young man in Britain named Patrick returned home after being kidnapped by pirates and spending 6 years in slavery at sea. He had a Christian background, but no vital faith until he became converted after that kidnapping and was called to the ministry. He was sent to convert Ireland as a Missionary and was responsible for bringing Christianity to pagan chieftains and farmers in that island. We know him as St. Patrick. Around 430, reflecting upon what had strengthened and sustained him through much hardship, he wrote these lines, now a great Christian hymn.

I bind unto myself the Name, The strong Name of the Trinity,
By invocation of the same, The Three in One, and One in Three,
Of whom all nature hath creation, Eternal Father, Spirit, Word.
Praise to the Lord of my salvation:
Salvation is of Christ the Lord.

The Holy Trinity is our strong safeguard and guide into relationship with the Living God.

“Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise Him all creatures here below. Praise him above ye heavenly host. Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.”

“Holy, holy, holy, God in three person, Blessed Trinity. Amen! So be it! Amen!”

ⁱ This description of the cicada drawn from an article by Todd Jones, “First Edition”, of First Presbyterian Church, Nashville, TN, June 1, 2011

ⁱⁱ Book of Order, PCUSA, W-4.4003

ⁱⁱⁱ Faith Seeking Understanding, Daniel Migliore

^{iv} Gen. 1:31