

Trinity Sunday-Year B, May 30, 2021  
All Saints', Littleton, NH  
The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Isaiah 6: 1-8

Psalm 29

Romans 8: 12-17

John 3: 1-17

The Trinity

Allow me to start today with a personal story of an experience over the last couple of days. On Friday I had a colonoscopy, and, with the risk of a bad pun, everything came out ok in the end! Well, the reason I'm telling you this is not to give you my health report, but to share a scare and my dialogue with scripture and God around it all. This is what we do as Christians. Anyway, I had the colonoscopy because 3 years ago was my regularly scheduled colonoscopy they removed a large, pre-cancerous polyp which was a little scary. I then had a follow up 6 months later and all was well. Once you have a polyp like that and are cleared after 6 months, they schedule you for a 3-year check, which is what happened Friday. Fortunately, everything was fine.

But here's the thing....the night before, and going through the joys of prep! (you know what that means!), I started having that conversation with God: "Well, I really would like to hang around here a bit longer to enjoy our new home and life with Doug after a very grueling 5 years, and especially after this last year dealing with the pandemic, but if it is time, I'm ready....not happy, but ready!" I thought about all those things you think about if you get a terminal diagnosis....when will you tell people, who will you tell first, what will you do with your time left, etc. With the simple report on Friday that all was fine, I was, as they say, given a new lease on life. And yesterday, when I was saying Morning Prayer, these scriptures were appointed and jumped out at me and reminded me of the blessing of scripture for capturing moments in your life:

From the 30<sup>th</sup> Psalm:

(2)O Lord my God, I cried out to you, and you restored me to health.

(3) You brought me up, O Lord, from the dead; you restored my life as I was going down to the grave.....

(6) Weeping may spend the night, but joy comes in the morning.

From the epistle reading for the day, from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 4 and 5:

<sup>16</sup> So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup> For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, <sup>18</sup> because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

[5] <sup>1</sup> For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. <sup>2</sup> For in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling – <sup>3</sup> if indeed, when we have taken it off<sup>[a]</sup> we will not be found naked. <sup>4</sup> For while we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. <sup>5</sup> He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

And so scripture was speaking to me, and reminding me of the mystery of true life beyond our mere mortal existence. But my small existential moment is nothing compared to what others in our parish are going through. We have recently lost 2 members of the parish, and others are living with knowing what will indeed take their life, which is its own crucible of angst. And yet it comes to us all, and someday I won't get good news. But when we live into our faith and awaken to the glory that is around us, we are not afraid. This is a good segue into a discussion of the Trinity and the lessons appointed for today.

The concept of the Trinity is an invitation into the mystery of God. An invitation into contemplative prayer, and an affirmation of the numinous character of God. All of our readings are part of that invitation and affirmation.

The word 'Trinity' is derived from the Latin word: Trinitas -meaning a triad, three together. The notion of the Trinity was not fully understood or formed in the first several centuries of Christianity. The Council of

Nicaea in 325 was partly called by the emperor, Constantine I, to settle the doctrine of the Trinity, and partly to get order and stability in the Roman Empire that had become Christian with Constantine's conversion. The theological debates in the church around the empire were destabilizing the political order! Imagine! The early church was pulled in different directions. Arian, a priest in Egypt, and his followers taught that Jesus was distinct and was created by the Father – not co-eternal. Docetism taught that Jesus only appeared to be human, but wasn't really human. To settle the controversies they developed a creed in the council of Nicaea, which we know as the Nicene Creed. Various offshoots of Christianity have rejected Trinitarianism-- in New England this is exemplified by Unitarianism.

And Jews and later Muslims accuse us of not really being monotheistic – saying that we have 3 Gods. One great refutation of this is the Athanasian Creed, (BCP 864), which goes on ad nauseum trying to explain what is in essence something of a mystery. [Reading a bit exemplifies well] Unfortunately, Athanasius was speaking to ongoing controversies around understanding God, Jesus, and the Spirit, and unfortunately, in my opinion, lost the 'spirit' in the 'substance' .....no pun intended. What he is attempting to do, using Greek philosophical thought, is proclaim the unity of the 3 separate manifestations/understandings that had come to be known.

The old Sunday school example was the 3 forms of H<sub>2</sub>O – water, steam, ice; or for us, perhaps maple sap, maple syrup, and maple sugar.....simplistic, but somewhat useful. Ah, but I have another one that occurred to me once when I was looking at the dappled light on the side of our old barn---sunlight that was filtered through a large maple tree. It was quite a beautiful scene and it occurred to me that the same sun light that hit the barn illumined the various shades of brown of the weathered shingles, the white paint of the woodwork around the windows, and the same light shot right through the windows to illuminate what was within! And then there was the other, more mystical metaphor---the shadow of the tree on the barn. The light was also made evident by what was in shadow! There's a mystical, Jungian concept for you! Ah, but the Trinity is mystery – we'll get back to that later.

Our first reading is the calling of Isaiah the prophet in Isaiah 6. This is a well-known passage that has motivated many who have felt called

through the ages. If any of you know the story of Jonathan Daniels, the young seminarian of this diocese who was martyred in the civil rights work in the South in the early 60's, his sense of calling came from an event where he was in church and heard this passage. He was in the Church of the Advent in Boston for Easter, which is an Episcopal church of the Anglo-Catholic tradition, and where there would have been a lot of incense, so the atmospherics of this passage would have been somewhat visible in that church too. His experience in the service and the strong sense of call had him also saying, 'Here am I, send me.'

The time of this passage is dated to about 742 BC, based on what we know of when King Uzziah reigned. The setting was the temple, and his vision was somewhat akin to the king's annual enthronement ceremony where he would have been with countless other priests and prophets. But his vision was of a heavenly celebration of Yahweh's majesty. Seraphs, the angelic being with 6 wings, surrounded Yahweh proclaiming 'Holy, Holy, Holy' [10AM—just as we sang in our first hymn]. His vision incorporated a ritualistic purification with the coal brought by a seraph to touch his lips and thereby purging him of sin before the holiness of God. What was this ecstatic experience of Isaiah that compelled him to say yes to God. Usually the stories of prophets' calls have the prophet initially trying to weasel out of the call, but not with Isaiah. Something happened for which he struggled to find words to express the reality of his mystical vision and experience of the Holy, Holy, Holy.

In John's gospel we have another well-known passage of scripture. Here John follows one of his favorite narratives: Jesus says something, maybe enigmatically, the person/people don't get it, and Jesus has to find some way to try to explain. Here Nicodemus, a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, comes to Jesus surreptitiously ---did you notice how it said he came at night. Well, he could get in trouble for being seen with this radical from Galilee--in the previous chapter Jesus had a tantrum in the temple and upset the money changers....and the chief priests!

Nicodemus seems to me to be a man who has a real spiritual life and is seeking this relationship with the Divine and is intrigued by what he hears Jesus preaching or by what people are saying about his preaching. Jesus is in the tradition of Wisdom teachers talking of mystical union with God. Nicodemus would likely have been exposed to this sort of mystical

tradition because of the Essenes – a mystical Jewish monastic sect that flourished from around the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC to the first century AD.

Nicodemus addresses Jesus in a very respectful way, he calls him “Rabbi” and he does so because of the signs that Jesus has done. In Jewish religious culture, giving signs is the proof that the person is of God, and was a necessary component to a prophet’s credentials. In the verses just previous to this chapter and after the cleansing of the temple, John says, “When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing.”

Nicodemus makes this respectful statement as an approach to Jesus, but Jesus responds to the unspoken question, as if he knew what Nicodemus was going to ask, about how to enter the kingdom of God, how to nurture that deep relationship and experience with Yahweh. Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.” Now this word in Greek “again” can also mean “from above”. And here we get into the back and forth between Jesus and Nicodemus as Nicodemus misunderstands his meaning – thinking Jesus is saying ‘born again’. But Jesus is talking about a different kind of birth. And here Jesus’ really reveals himself as a wisdom teacher and a teacher that calls us into mystical union with God.

And let me remind everyone that though the scripture comes down to us in Greek, Jesus would have been speaking in Aramaic, the language of the people, and scholars will tell you that Aramaic is a language that has built-in capacity for layers of meaning, particularly in scripture. In Aramaic words can be read from the intellectual, or literal meaning, the metaphorical meaning, and the universal, or mystical meaning. With these 3 approaches to the sayings of Jesus and the scripture, it becomes much easier to understand that any attempt to pretend that there is just a ‘literal’ meaning is basically an ignorant approach to the teachings in the original language.

Anyone who has read the great mystics of Christianity, or better yet, has developed a prayer life of silence and adoration, knows what Jesus is talking about here. When you have walked into the holy cloud of God in prayer, all of what Jesus says begins to make more and more sense. And you also get the ‘Holy, holy, holy’ of Isaiah!

In the practice of contemplative prayer, teachers often talk about turning from the ‘false self’; here Jesus uses the language of ‘flesh’, but in

this context he is not talking about our bodies, he is talking about a spiritual sense of 'flesh', or the false self. Nicodemus still doesn't get it, and Jesus marvels that the preacher who just doesn't understand an essential truth to his own faith...." If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? " Jesus certainly taught about how to live on earth, and gave moral guidance too, but his ultimate purpose was to point to the heavenly; but a heavenly experience that was still grounded in lived reality – 'on earth as it is in 'heaven', as it were. This was so much more than religious obedience to the Law, which is what Nicodemus was steeped in. And yet, I think Nicodemus knew there was something more and all through the Law and the Prophets were indications of this experience of God. That's why he was there.

And later, do you remember how when Jesus was being accused of sin and error in the Sanhedrin, that same Nicodemus came to his defense – when he was a lone voice doing so (John 7:45). And at the end, it was Nicodemus along with Joseph of Arimathea who asked Pilate for Jesus' body to bury him. Nicodemus came with a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloe for his embalming. (John 19:39). Nicodemus was a seeker.

St. Paul uses 'flesh' in the same way as Jesus in this passage from his letter to the Romans. Paul too, I believe, though a Pharisee like Nicodemus, was essentially a mystical seeker, and especially after his experience with Christ on the road to Damascus. Paul, in his own way, here talks about the contrast between the way of the flesh and the way of the spirit as being the way of death or life---and in mystical practice we would say, the way of the false self as opposed to the way of the true self. When we are in our true self, our spirit cries out 'Abba Father' – this most intimate of expressions to heavenly parent from the Aramaic.....and 'it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ (v. 16/17). When you experience this in prayer, you get what Paul is saying---you realize the sublime love of God, fear goes away, and your heart is full of gratitude!

So what of the Trinity? I suppose that just like the early Christians we had a hard time understanding and expressing these 3 manifestations of God – the First Principle that caused all to be, the essence of God that moves in and through all things, and the child of God born in time and space to reconnect us all to the 'Holy, Holy, Holy', and be reunited with

them in his risen-ness. We have a hard time understanding all that with our limitations of our brains and language, and our limited understanding of physics and quantum physics, until we experience and understand with the eyes not of our flesh, but the eyes of our 'true self'.

The spiritual beauty of the divine three is best understood in the very fact of the relationship and communion of the three. They are teaching us about how to be in relationship. Christian mystics have said that in prayer, they really get it – like a cosmic dance among the three as one. When we cross over into the new dimension, we will get it – there will be no confusion, just union. Arguments over the Trinity will just be silly and superfluous; all of which is wrangled in the mess of this world and the limitation of language.

So, next time you are stumbling over the three in one and one in three, remember that today we celebrate the mystery of love and relationship, not a problem of mathematics.

I will close with this

Celtic blessing.....

The following caim (or 'encircling') prayer is a fine example of this development:

The compassing of God be upon you,  
the compassing of God, of the God of life.

The compassing of Christ be upon you,  
the compassing of the Christ of love.

The compassing of the Spirit be upon you,  
the compassing of the Spirit of grace.

The compassing of the Sacred Three be upon you,  
the compassing of the Sacred Three protect you,

The compassing of the Sacred Three preserve you. Amen.

[SOURCE *Celtic Daily Prayer from the Northumbria Community*]