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5/30/21—University Presbyterian Church  
Isaiah 6:1-8; John 3:1-17

## MAKING A CASE FOR MYSTERY

The Christian Church has declared this Sunday, the Sunday following Pentecost, to be Trinity Sunday. Last Sunday we celebrated the gift of the Holy Spirit, and so now, this Sunday the Church invites us to try to make sense of what we call the Trinity: the idea of God as Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. But truthfully, no one can really make sense of this idea of God, the three-in-one.

Outsiders to the Christian faith, and some insiders too, have misunderstood the Trinity to mean that Christians worship 3 Gods: one big God and two lesser gods. But the Christian Church through the ages has firmly rejected that idea of multiple gods. There is but one God, known to us in what is referred to as three persons: the Creator, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit. The Christian Church has insisted on the distinctiveness of the three persons of the Trinity while also insisting on the unity of God. The triangle was adopted as a Christian symbol to try to express this complex idea of the Trinity, with each side of the triangle representing a person of the Trinity. Each side is integral in creating the whole triangle. That seemed fine until Christians slipped into the habit of thinking of each person of the Trinity as a point on the triangle rather than a side of the triangle. And then, we were back to the problem of one top boss God and two subordinate gods.

The headache we get from pondering this complex doctrine might tempt us to give up on the doctrine of the Trinity altogether. Why bother if it's so complicated and impossible to understand? But let's wait just a second. For while the doctrine of the Trinity is complex,

confusing, and confounding, it is not silly. One of the values I think we people of faith can find in the idea of the Trinity is that it preserves the mystery of God.

In Western cultures, the appreciation for mystery is not as strong as it once was. As science has enabled us to understand much about the natural world, and as technology has enabled humanity to expand its capabilities, there seem to be fewer occasions when we experience mystery. But centuries ago, people found plenty of mystery in the world. From the planets in the sky to the workings of the human body, it was all mysterious. And the mystery of God was intertwined in it all.

When we talk about the mystery of God we are speaking about the *transcendence* of God. Something is *transcendent* when it eludes our ability to fully comprehend it, when it transcends our explanations. We hear the prophet Isaiah attempt to capture some of God's transcendence in the reading today. In this reading we are given an example of the imagination early people of faith had when contemplating the mystery of God. To express the mystery of God, Isaiah turns to using extraordinary imagery. Isaiah takes us to the throneroom of God and describes how the hem of God's robe filled the temple and how winged heavenly beings flew around praising God. Ordinary imagery was not adequate to capture the mystery and majesty of God. Isaiah was compelled to draw upon depictions and descriptions that transcend our earthly experiences.

Ancient peoples fully appreciated God's transcendence. I even wonder if the mystery of God was part of God's appeal. This God of mystery filled them with awe and wonder and was vastly unlike themselves or their ordinary lives. Think about the way ancient peoples in particular were attracted to certain geographic places where it was believed they could more readily encounter the mysterious presence of God—like the ancient Celtic sites of worship. Ancient peoples as well as modern ones still make pilgrimages to such places just to draw close

to the mysterious presence of God. That is really what Christian cathedrals and even more modest churches like ours were created to be. Traditional church architecture was intended to create unique places where worshippers could leave their ordinary world behind and enter a place where they could encounter the mystery of God.

To some degree, I think we modern Westernized Christians have less patience with mystery. We like to know things. We like to understand things. We like certainties. And mystery is the opposite of certainty. But when it comes to our relationship with God, certainty is really a form of idolatry. When we are certain we have God all figured out, when we are certain we know God's mind and how God works in our world and in our lives, we have fashioned God in our own image. And that is idolatry.

Mystery, however, is an important element of faith. Appreciating that God lies beyond our understanding and our ability to control keeps us humble. We understand our place in this relationship. We are the creature, not the Creator.

Moreover, I believe that embracing the mystery of God is beneficial to our faith. When something is certain and knowable, we cease to be curious about it. But mystery draws us forward in curiosity and wonder. Think about how a good mystery novel engages the readers, drawing them into the story to contemplate and wonder about the mystery and its possible answer. In a similar way, the mystery of God engages us and draws us deeper into the relationship. And we can stand in awe and wonder and gratitude before the God who transcends us and yet desires to be in relationship with us.

This is what we see happening in the story of Nicodemus. Nicodemus was curious about this teacher from God named Jesus who people had been talking about. He was drawn to learn more, to engage this mystery. Never could he imagine the magnitude of mystery he would

experience in meeting Jesus—for Jesus tells Nicodemus that in order to experience the Kingdom of God, a person must be born again. Well this is a complete mystery for Nicodemus. How can someone enter their mother's womb a second time? We modern people reading this story think we've solved the mystery. We know that Jesus was speaking metaphorically, not that a person would actually have to enter their mother's womb again. But does that mean the mystery is really resolved? Is it not just as mysterious how a person can be reborn by the Spirit while they are still alive in this world? Have you ever known that kind of rebirth yourself or witnessed it in another?

When Christian Picciolini was 14 he joined a neo-Nazi organization. By the age of 16 he had risen to become the leader of a skinhead group of white supremacists. For years he carried out acts of violence and preached a message of hate. One day he and a group of his neo-Nazi followers chased an African American man out of a bar and proceeded to brutally beat the man for no reason other than the color of his skin. As the man lay curled up on the ground, bloodied from the beating, Christian recalls the man opened his eyes and made eye contact with him. In that moment Christian saw the man's humanity and for the first time he had empathy for one of his victims. And from this awakening, he began to distance himself from his ties with white nationalists and eventually to sever all ties with them. And later he would offer counseling to other individuals trying to leave hate groups.

What can possibly account for this mysterious change? Was this change the working of the Creator? Was it the working of the Risen Jesus? Was it the working of the Holy Spirit? Yes, to all three. Such is the mystery of God the three-in-one. Jesus tells Nicodemus, "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.” And Nicodemus, hearing this is still left confused and declares, “How can these things be?”

The nature of God the three-in-one, the activity of God in transforming us, the love of God in the face of our colossal failures may leave us wondering as well, “How can these things be?” Much remains a mystery. The doctrine of the Trinity will remain a mystery. We do not have to understand it to appreciate it and to dwell in the mystery. What matters most is that we appreciate that as Creator, as Christ, and as Holy Spirit, this unfathomable God continually draws close to us in love. For God so loved the world that God gave the Son so that we may not perish but have lasting life.