

GOD'S JOURNEY

John 16: 12-15; Romans 5: 1-11; Psalm 8

Have you ever been on a journey? I'm sure you have. We all have. The word 'journey' has become a very popular way of describing life. Of course, a journey is also something many of us think of more literally. We travel. We love to describe all the places we go, the things we see, and the experiences we have. We take pictures and post them.

But the word 'journey' is also a way of describing an inner process. Whether we've gone through something traumatic, or a new kind of experience, or whether it's about a relationship or an illness, describing the journey and reflecting on the journey is a way of finding inner meaning, purpose, growth, healing, insight, acceptance and peace. I'm sure any one of us can talk about our journey of life through many situations, circumstances and relationships in our lives – changes we've experienced, losses, opportunities we've taken on, decisions we've made and then reflecting on the consequences and the learning.

Well, 'journey' is also a good word to describe God the way the bible tells the story of God. And this is important because today in the church year is 'Trinity Sunday.' As Christians, we confess God is one like other faiths such as Islam and Judaism. But as Christians we also confess that God is three. Three means God is plural. How can God be one and yet also three? Why complicate God?

Well, in order to understand how we came up with the doctrine of the Trinity as Christians, we need to understand the journey of God as the bible describes it. As Christians, we recognize this journey in three parts.

Part 1. God above:

Psalm 8 is a great description of what God above can mean. To experience God above is to experience God's greatness as creator of all that is. When we truly contemplate the wonders of our world, and when we open ourselves to see in all that is a creative force that is love, we are opening ourselves to God above. We pray to such a God and seek the creative power of God's love to fill us, strengthen us and guide us through our own life journeys. We need God above us because we are only human. Even as we have unique abilities and possibilities, we are also vulnerable creatures.

Psalm 8 captures this paradox beautifully: “O God, Our God, how glorious is your name over all the earth! When I look at the heavens, the moon and the stars which you have created – who are we that you should be mindful of us, that you should care for us?” And yet, you have “crowned us with glory and honour.” You have given us rule over the work of your hands, giving us responsibility for the earth, to care for it in partnership with you. What an awesome gift and privilege for us vulnerable creatures.

Our journey through life in relationship with the God above is a journey of discovering our purpose as creatures created out of love, to love in return. How spiritually alive is your relationship with the God above? How do you commune with and pray to God above? This brings us to part two of God’s journey.

Part 2. God beside:

We as human beings mess things up for all our ability and possibility. We make mistakes and if that’s not bad enough, we compound our mistakes by trying to deny them, justify them, blame others, blame circumstances or shut ourselves down in shame rather than take responsibility. That’s our story. But since we are connected with God, God’s story evolves in relationship to our story. How is God above going to engage our failure and mistakes? Will God destroy us in God’s wrath at all the hurt and harm we are so good at committing? Or will God find another way with us?

This is where our second reading from Romans gives us a sample of the next move in the story of God, namely, God beside us in the person of Jesus Christ. God chooses to engage our failure and our mistakes by coming to be where we are rather than demanding we go where God is and then punishing us for failing to make it. Jesus comes as a particular human being to a particular people, vulnerable and limited just like any of us. And yet, Jesus also carries in him this infinite love of God which he embodies in a way that can transform us.

As Christians, we make the audacious claim that God’s true heart is revealed in this move of God from simply being above us to also coming to be beside us, to live as we live, share our lives in their ups and downs, their possibility and their pain, the good and the evil around us and in us too. In Jesus, God comes to be beside us.

Our reading from Romans speaks about Christ opening up a new door to God, a new way to find restoration through all the mistakes and failures of life. To have faith in Jesus as God’s way with us is to have faith that God’s love will find a way to rebuild relationship with us when we have failed: ‘therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God

through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand...'

Instead of continuing to deny, suppress, justify, blame or shame our way through life, we open ourselves to be forgiven, and forgiven even when we have been enemies of God rather than friends: 'For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us... And so, 'if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God' through Christ, 'much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.'

Nothing we can do will push God away from reaching out to us as God beside us. Christ's death was a great act of injustice. Maybe most of us are not like the religious leaders who hated Jesus enough to kill an innocent man, or like the Romans who cared for nothing but maintaining their power and control. But many of us can be like Jesus' disciples who were too scared to stand up with him and for him, or like the crowds who will take Jesus as God so long as they get miracles, but reject him when he calls them to find greater purpose in giving than getting for themselves.

God above us also comes to be God beside us. God above us we pray to for strength, love, empowerment to be and do, for healing and for peace. With God beside us we have the added movement of forgiveness which opens the door to a new way of engaging our mistakes and failures. We don't have to be stuck in denial or blame or shame. If Christ crucified can forgive, then it means God seeks a new relationship with us on a new foundation. Are you prepared to start again and again with God beside you as Jesus opening the way?

But the journey still has one more part for God and for us.

Part 3. God within:

The final part of God's journey is to find a home within us. No longer are we simply praying to God above as if God is distant, and no longer are we just following Jesus as if Jesus is outside us. We also have God within us, communing with us in the most intimate way through our inner discernment, our conscience, our heart, our mind, our spiritual passion and compassion, our capacity to love and our conversion to forgiveness as we are forgiven. This is God within. We have what we need to grow spiritually and to face whatever comes our way through life. God is always with us because God is in us. Do you recognize God within you?

John's gospel makes this movement from God above and God beside to God within very explicit. Our lesson this morning is an example. Jesus tells his followers this: 'I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you in all truth; for he will not speak on his own, but whatever he hears... All that the Father has is mine...' The Spirit will 'take what is mine and declare it to you.' From God above, to Christ beside, to the Spirit within... God surrounds us and flows through us when we are in prayerful and worshipful communion with God. We pray to God above, through Christ beside, and experience the transforming energy of the Spirit within.

And this movement of God in three parts was also incorporated in our discussion with our confirmands and mentors... We discussed God and Christ and the Holy Spirit in different ways. We looked at bible passages and did exercises together. We prayed and learned some different kind of prayer practices. We also discussed the importance of spiritual community, even as life is hectic and busy and individualistic, spiritual community reinforces and builds up our individual spiritual journeys.

We also discussed how beliefs and spiritual practices like worship, must lead to inner experiences. Believing and praying to God above takes concrete form in God beside as Jesus teaches, demonstrates and lives God's love. But then, we need to move to that final part of experiencing the movement of God within as Spirit. The movement of the Spirit within becomes love for people, conscience and conviction about right and wrong, a passion to commit to what is right even when it costs us, and a purpose to live God's love from within as a mission outward into the world. Thinking of God as Trinity doesn't confuse our understanding and experience of God as love. It enriches it.

May God inspire us as we need to be inspired. In our fears, our stress, our uncertainty, our abilities, possibilities and opportunities, our high points of joy and our low points of despair... God surrounds us, is beside us and flows in and through us so that we are never alone. Do you recognize God in your life this way? Amen.