

Baptize, Teach, and Remember

I was back in Minnesota a couple of weeks ago, in part, to be at my oldest nephew's confirmation. Elijah is 15 and had been preparing for it for three years. Over zoom with his Godmother Marja (a Lutheran pastor in Saskatchewan) he had studied scripture, faith in a Lutheran light, and its application in the world he lives in.

It was a beautiful spring-in-Minnesota day. My parents and I (along with my sister's family) piled into the minivan and drove 20 minutes to my Brother-in-Law Kent's church in Good Thunder. It's an old country church with a warm community, eager to bear witness as Elijah crossed that threshold.

Confirmation is a rite of passage for most faith traditions that practice infant baptism. I was in attendance at Elijah's baptism when he was three months old. But this was Elijah's time to "confirm" that his baptism mattered to him and that he chooses the faith into which he was baptized.

Kent led the service and I led the confirmation part. The presentation of Elijah at his baptism all those years ago began this way: "Dear friends, we gather today with Elijah who has been called by God's Spirit to inquire into the Christian faith and life. And the closing prayer of his confirmation was this:

Stir up in Elijah the gift of your Holy Spirit: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence, both now and forever.

Baptize, teach, and remember.

Today is Holy Trinity Sunday. We are not unfamiliar with the idea of the Trinity - of God as one being in three persons - but do we believe it? I think most of us tend to consider it a paradox that we can safely ignore. The creeds developed in the early centuries of the faith that we speak to this day make it familiar. The Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed in particular lay out the backbone of the faith that we practice together in worship: Father, Son + and Holy Spirit, "of one being." But in some ways it feels like to press the issue complicates our relationship with God, with our faith, with the Church. It could get in the way.

The question then is why? Why did they have to write it all down? Why do we say the creeds and practice this faith in a Triune God? In the wisdom of the Church, we have been given this day - Holy Trinity Sunday - a day that presses the issue and puts it squarely in view for us to wrestle with. "God is one and God is three," the Church says. "Deal, wrestle, with that."

So let's wrestle with it, see what might be important about the idea of a Triune God for our faith and practice.

The scriptures give God and Jesus a great deal of air time throughout the year. Truly it's mostly God in the Old Testament (God's relationship with God's people), and mostly Jesus (revealing God) in the New Testament. But it's only every so often that we catch a glimpse of the Holy Spirit.

Yes, Pentecost Sunday last week was a big day for the Spirit, who came in thunderous wind, flaming tongues of fire and the pouring forth of language describing God's deeds of power (language unfamiliar to those suddenly speaking it. But that story is not the first time we've encountered this Spirit.

Her first appearance we heard just a moment ago: The very second verse of Genesis, the first book of the bible, at the birth of creation itself, we hear a whisper - "a wind from God swept over the face of the deep" - stirring creation into existence. That word in Hebrew here translated as wind is *Ruach*, but its meaning includes both *breath* and *spirit*.

We hear of God's Spirit too in Psalm 104 - "You send forth your Spirit and they are created; and so you renew the face of the earth." The Spirit is also a big part of Jesus' own baptism, not only because it descends like a dove, alighting on him, but because that very same Spirit then "leads" him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

And isn't there some truth to that - that it's not to a family luncheon and photo op that Jesus heads home to after his baptism; it's wilderness, hunger, wandering alone and temptation. This Spirit blowing over the waters of creation and new life perhaps leads us there too, but perhaps more accurately, she goes with us into the realities of life that wait for us beyond the water. That's an important piece for me - that when God and Jesus feel most distant on our wilderness road, the wind still blows, the Spirit is near.

So Jesus himself has some familiarity with the spirit when he tells the disciples, having appeared to them risen from the dead, "Receive the Holy Spirit". And here, in the last verses of Matthew, telling them to

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you, remembering that I am with you always, to the end of the age.

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Baptized in this threefold name, whether as an infant or an adult, life comes all too quickly afterward. So Jesus tells disciples to teach the faith that goes along with it. I think Jesus knew that teaching is an act of self-formation as much (if not moreso) as it might form others. But remembering is the key to this - remembering that baptizing and making disciples are only done in the presence of Jesus, in the presence and activity of the Spirit. It's that memory that formed Elijah over three years, that led him to a place where he could say "Yes, this is my faith." Is that a done deal then? New disciple - check? Of course not. Life will test the shape of that faith, just as it has and does yours. But as it is tested, that memory (the very grasp of the Spirit) remains close at hand. That's what baptism promises and reveals. Remember your baptism.

Note one thing before we conclude. Note the command of Jesus that came before baptize, teach and remember. "Go" he tells them, for none of this happens automatically.

At one point, having returned to the house with everyone and waiting to eat, my mother presented me with a stack of cards and asked me to pick one and sign it for Elijah. She will tell you I have been a terrible card giver over my 40 years. Every year for her birthday, my father recycles the same card he had me fill out when I must have been 7 (?). I've never gotten into the habit of giving cards because they never seem to be personal enough. But i picked one, signed it and wrote a little note. "Elijah, congratulations on your confirmation. Well done. Now go, and make this faith your own."

This is my hope for Elijah, just as this is my hope for you, beloved. If the Trinity seems foreign, complicating and distracting, put it aside - it will wait until your faith can bear it, or until your faith might need it. But in this great, lifelong task of making this faith your own, you join in a community that includes ancestors, people you've never met or have yet to meet, a great and holy communion that includes all people of faith, and even God, Jesus, and the Spirit we call holy.

This work is a dance, a braid of sweetgrass, into which we are swept up and carried, woven into new life daily. Attend to the strand, attend to the community that's carried you and carries you still, even in the midst of the life that threatens to loosen the bond and carry you elsewhere. This is the life we are given in Christ - a life in communion with God, the Holy Spirit, and the great cloud of witnesses beyond and close at hand.

So may the Spirit lead you deeper and further in this community than you ever thought you'd go.

AMEN