

Readings & Sermon May 26, 2024

Holy Trinity Sunday

Pastor Jaime Larson-McLoone

“Experiences, not answers.”



Is it possible to understand the mysteries of the Holy Trinity? As we ponder the Trinity, and confess our faith in the Triune God, let's not look for absolute answers and unshakeable understanding. Instead, let's seek a wild encounter with the divine that leads us to new understanding, a new sense of wonder, and new life.

Gospel: John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 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.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

First Reading: Isaiah 6:1-8

This reading narrates Isaiah’s vision of the Lord surrounded by angels. They sing “Holy, holy, holy,” a song the church sometimes sings before Holy Communion. This liturgical text invites the church and all creation to sing in praise of God’s glory. That glory is God’s mercy toward sinners.

¹In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ²Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” ⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me

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Nicodemus just doesn't get it. Born from above? Nobody gets born a second time. Being born is a once-and-done thing, Jesus. Born of water and the Spirit? What does that even mean?

Oh, Nicodemus. He of all people should get it, right? He's a Pharisee. Knowledgeable in scripture and law. A leader in his faith community. Someone with his credentials should be the first to notice and understand who Jesus is and what Jesus is talking about. Right?

Nicodemus is supposed to be someone with answers. Yet he sneaks out in the dead of night because he also has some questions: questions he's not willing to ask publicly. And he doesn't understand the answers anyway. And maybe that's OK. Maybe Nicodemus doesn't need to understand everything right now.

Maybe we don't, either. Maybe on this Trinity Sunday, Nicodemus has something to teach us. Maybe as we celebrate and confess our belief that God exists in a community - one in three, three in one, Father, Son, and Spirit - maybe we can confess that we, too, don't quite get what that means or how that works.

And we'll find ourselves asking along with Nicodemus: How can these things be? We have tried to find answers:

The Trinity is like an apple - seed, flesh, and skin. Or like water in all its forms - solid, liquid, and gas. It's like a three-leaf clover. But at the root of each of those simple images for the Trinity is some kind of ancient heresy. So how in the world are we supposed to understand?

What if we set that question aside? Today, let's not even try to understand. Let's stop trying to apply our earthly logic to the nature of God's existence. Let's stop trying to diagram and explain and contain God.

Instead, let's embrace mystery and wonder. Today let's confess a God who is infinitely beyond our human understanding - but who still comes to dwell among us in Jesus. A God as unpredictable and uncontrollable as the wind - but who dwells within us through the Holy Spirit.

Let's stand with Isaiah in the smoke-filled throne room, surrounded by six-winged supernatural beings singing "Holy, Holy, Holy." Let's encounter a God so magnificent that just the hem of a robe fills the whole temple. Let's hear a voice that breaks cedar trees, shakes the wilderness, and strips the forests bare also speak right to us: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"

And then maybe Nicodemus' befuddlement will make sense. How can these things be?

Some people conclude that they cannot, and they turn away. That seems to be Nicodemus' first response.

But we haven't seen the last of Nicodemus.

Later, as the other leaders talk about arresting Jesus, Nicodemus will come to his defense. Not in the boldest way, but he will raise his hand to interrupt the rush to judgment: "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" he will ask.

That's all we'll hear of him for a while. But then Nicodemus will show up at Jesus's burial, assisting a secret disciple named Joseph of Arimathea. Nicodemus will arrive lugging a hundred pounds of spices - an outrageous, extravagant abundance - to prepare Jesus' body for entombment.

Over the course of this gospel, Nicodemus grows in understanding. When we met him, he was already a faith leader and expert in the law. He seems to call himself an old man. And there were still new things for him to learn, new insights to receive, new life to experience. Even this wise, old expert had room to grow in understanding - and he would still never fully grasp the mystery and vastness and wonder of God. Who could?

There is always more to see. There is always more to learn. And we will never know it all. But if we are open to it, God will keep surprising us. Sometimes in ways that shake our foundations, upend our lives, and leave us with more questions than answers.

“You have been given questions to which you cannot be given answers. You will have to live them out - perhaps a little at a time.” That’s a nugget of wisdom that landed in my junk email this week. It comes from Wendell Berry’s novel “Jayber Crow.” In this scene, Jayber, a ministry student, is having a conversation with his New Testament Greek professor.

“You have been given questions to which you cannot be given answers. You will have to live them out - perhaps a little at a time.”

"And how long is that going to take?"

"I don't know. As long as you live, perhaps."

"That could be a long time."

"I will tell you a further mystery," he said. "It may take longer."

I don't know about you, but that statement gives me goosebumps - in a good way.

That is the kind of mystery we are invited to ponder this Trinity Sunday. Not a mystery to unravel or solve. A mystery that stirs up awe and wonder and goosebumps. A mystery that draws us ever closer to the God who created the whole universe - AND still shows up in simple things like bread and wine and water and word.

That’s the kind of awe and wonder that compels a doubter, a skeptic, a reluctant defender and perhaps secret disciple like Nicodemus to show up at Jesus’ tomb with more spices than necessary. Almost too much to carry. First, though,

Nicodemus had to let go of his need for logical answers and tidy explanations. Only then, could he be born anew.

As we ponder the Trinity, as we confess our faith in the Triune God, today let's learn from Nicodemus' journey. Let's not look for absolute answers and unshakeable understanding. But let's seek a wild encounter with the divine that leads us to new understanding, a new sense of wonder, and new life.

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