

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

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God's Math

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Trinity Sunday

Today is Trinity Sunday. The day in the Christian calendar when all who are bad at math rejoice! Because three equals one and one equals three. God's ways are not our ways, and God's math is not always our math.

The Trinity is a theological concept, a formula that puts words and numbers to how followers of Jesus have experienced who God is. You will not find the word, "trinity" in the Bible. You will not find—in all the sermons, in all the theology texts, in all the Christian creeds—a satisfactory explanation of what we mean by one God in three persons. It is a paradox. It is a mystery we confess to be true, rather than a puzzle that we have solved.

But what you will find in Scripture and in the wrestling of theologians, preachers, and Christians throughout the centuries are hints, clues, experiences of the divine that point to the surprising three-in-one nature of God.

As we listen for God's living word to us in both the Old and New Testaments this morning, I invite you to wonder: Who does this say God is? What surprises me?

First, let's turn to God in prayer.

Prayer for Illumination

Triune God of love,

We come to listen for your word with a myriad of things on our minds and in our hearts.

Most of us did not come today for an abstract lecture on church doctrine.

We are here to worship you, to experience your presence, to

better understand who you call us to be in this complicated, heartbreaking, and beautiful world.

Speak wisdom to our minds, grace to our hearts, and propel us from this place with your love. Amen.

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

Does not wisdom call and understanding raise her voice?

² On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand;

³ beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out:

⁴ "To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all who live."

The Lord created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.

²³ Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.

²⁴ When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.

²⁵ Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth,

²⁶ when he had not yet made earth and fields or the world's first bits of soil.

²⁷ When he established the heavens, I was there;
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,

²⁸ when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,

²⁹ when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,

³⁰ then I was beside him, like a master worker,

and I was daily his delight, playing before him always,
³¹ playing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.

John 16:12-15

¹² "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵ All that the Father has is mine. For this reason, I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Context of John's Gospel

What did you hear about who God is? What surprised you?

Throughout Jesus' ministry, especially as it is recorded in the Gospel of John, he taught his disciples a new way of understanding who God was—they needed to look at him, listen to him, believe in him. Jesus said only what the Father told him; Jesus and the Father were one—the same God they knew from the Hebrew Scriptures, from prayer, from worship in the Temple was revealed in-the-flesh beside them.

They had to wrestle with this. The men and women who first followed Jesus were Jewish. All their lives, they had recited the Shema, "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God; the Lord is One." So, at first, Jesus was viewed as a teacher, a rabbi, then a

healer, a prophet, then the Messiah, the Savior of the world, and eventually, as the Son of God, as fully human and fully God.

The Gospel of John has the most robust understanding of this oneness between Jesus and the Creator God. John was written as the last of the four gospels—around 90 CE—and there had been time for followers of Jesus to reflect on what they had heard and experienced with Jesus, as well as, in the decades after his resurrection. Further, the community from which this gospel was written was living through persecution. They were wondering, where is God now? How are we to understand the God we worship and the Christ we follow with our lives—and possibly to our deaths? Who is God calling us to be in the time in which we find ourselves living?

We dropped into John's Gospel this morning in the middle of what is called the farewell discourse. Jesus had already warned his disciples that he would soon die. He will be handed over to religious and political authorities; he will lay down his life willingly to the violence of the crowd and the state; he will be raised to resurrected life three days later; he will return to the Father. But, right before Jesus is arrested, he reassures them that they will not be left alone in the world.

The Spirit will come.

I want to pause and explain a choice I am going to make in this sermon. I generally, and will momentarily, speak of the Holy Spirit with feminine pronouns. Here is why:

God is not a man, though our default pronouns for God tend to be masculine. I try to just call God, God. It gets clumsy sometimes with words like, "Godself," but it keeps the truth of God being God, not a man in the sky.

Jesus was a man on earth, so masculine pronouns make perfect sense.

The Spirit in both Hebrew and Greek is expressed in feminine words. The pronouns in Greek are neutral. The verbs are not gendered. So, there is a choice to be made in translation. It matters that one person of the Trinity is spoken of in feminine she and her pronouns, so that we can better hear and understand that God made us all in God's image. That who God is goes beyond the male pronouns to which we most often default. The Spirit as she is true to the words of Scripture, and it is true to the nature of God as revealed in human beings made in God's image.

Back to the Scripture.

Jesus reassures his disciples that even though he is leaving them, they will not be alone. The Spirit will come and will guide them to all truth. The Spirit will not speak on her own, but will speak only what she hears, and she will help them understand what God is up to in them and in the world.

This Spirit does not come and just do her own thing. Like Christ is one with the Father, the Spirit is one with Christ and the Father. This is God's math.

Jesus shares this with his disciples, not as a catechism to memorize or a doctrine to argue for or against, but as comfort in amid pain, as encouragement amid sorrow, as security amid uncertainty.

Jesus shares with them this fuller truth of who God is.

God is not an abstract formula to solve. God is a loving relationship to be experienced.

The disciples don't get right away, but Jesus promises that the Spirit will make it make sense in time. The Spirit will lead them into deeper truth.

The Spirit still leads us deeper into truth.

Deeper truth about who God is...

That the God who formed a covenant with Abraham, who spoke on the mountain to Moses, who sent the prophets... Is the same God, who came into the world as a vulnerable baby born, who walked along the shore of Galilee preaching and healing, who was betrayed and arrested, executed and raised...

Is the same God, who will soon blow into the upper room like a whipping wind, who will soon enable them to preach the gospel in every language, who will soon empower them to heal and welcome and reflect God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

One God, who was and is and always will be, in three persons.

And deeper truth about who we are called to be...
As humans created in God's image.
As followers of Christ, desiring to walk faithfully in his path.
As God's people gathered, empowered, and sent out by the Holy Spirit.
But we'll put a pin in that for a moment. Because there is a literal illustration that will help us get there.

The Practical Reality of the Trinity

There is a famous icon from the Russian Orthodox tradition, painted by Andrei Rublev in the early 1400's, and simply called, "Trinity." Perhaps you have come across it—if not, give it a google sometime today. Icons are not just meant to be paintings. They are a window into contemplating the divine, whether through a depiction of Christ or a saint or some other earthly entryway to sensing God's presence with us.

Rublev's Trinity shows three winged men, seated at a table, arranged like a sitcom family, so all three are facing you the observer. It depicts the story in Genesis about three strangers, who arrive at Abraham's tent. He urges them to stay, and while they rest in the shade of a tree, he brings them water and gets his whole household moving to prepare the finest meal he can provide. Back in the tent, these visitors share the good news that Sarah will give birth to a long-awaited son. Abraham recognizes these strangers as angels, God's messengers to him.

But the Trinity icon does not only depict that story. It is meant to convey a deeper truth—the three angels are but a clue, a hint, an experience of the divine that points to a reality

beyond our understanding: That God is one and three. That this Triune God may come to us in the form of the stranger. The icon is an invitation to see the Triune God in acts of hospitality, generosity, relationship.

The table is open for us to sit and join in the company of God.

*God's table, God's family, God's love is open to each of us.
And that invitation to love comes to us in surprising ways.*

This is the deeper truth that the Spirit has illuminated over the centuries, expanding upon what Jesus taught and showed his disciples when he walked among them.

This is the deeper truth of our calling in the world, of our lives as they are joined to the life of the Trinity: *That love is not an abstract notion.*

It is give and take in real relationships. It is sitting down with strangers to share hospitality. It is treating others the way you would want to be treated. It is seeing God embodied in the imprisoned, the hungry, the thirsty, the foreigner, the sick, and the impoverished...and doing something to help.

Tapping into God's Wisdom

There is a foolish idea in our world that we can love God and not care about certain people. That we can love God and view others as competition for our resources or standard of living. That we can love God and ignore when other people are treated with callousness because they were born in Gaza or they sought safety in a new land but without proper documentation or they don't dress or speak or conduct

themselves in ways we find respectable or they don't hold our political viewpoints or practice our religion, or, or, or...

The wisdom of God is woven throughout all of creation, threads of grace throughout all our lives, and the story of humanity. God is love. God is relationship. If we want to love God, we must love others in relationship. God's love for us moves us beyond ourselves to love others.

Even when it is costly. Even when it seems like bad math.

I remember when common core math was rolled out and people on the internet collectively lost their minds. I did not have children, yet, but saw the videos about how silly the new method of teaching was— and agreed, with little to no knowledge, the way you do after seeing a video online.

When our daughter started having homework, I struggled to learn how she was learning. I had to learn a new way of doing math with her. And can I tell you something crazy...I can add, subtract, multiple, and divide without a calculate so much easier now. I was foolish in assuming what I knew was the only way and the best way.

That is human nature.

But God calls us to expand what we think we know to be the only and the best and the true; to see God in people and situations beyond our own assumptions, experience, and understanding.

That $1+1+1=1$ is bad human math. Extravagant hospitality, abundant generosity, caring for and about those on the

margins without thinking about what our return on investment will be— that is bad human math.
But it is God's math.

And so, may it be our wisdom as we are guided by the Spirit to love as God does in our time and place.

Amen.



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