

Festival of the Holy Trinity – May 27

This is one of the more peculiar days in the Church year. Most holiday (holy days) celebrate an event in the Bible or the work of the Spirit through a singular individual like St. Paul or Martin Luther or Francis of Assisi. Today we really celebrate either a doctrine or the mother of all voter's meetings/conventions. The holiday which comes closest to this might be the Festival of the Reformation which really can be seen as a celebration of a doctrinal movement.

The Feast of the Holy Trinity was not regularly added to the liturgical calendar until the late medieval period when a number of Unitarian and Gnostic movements again arose because the western European Christians had been so poorly catechized. These groups would be the bane of the Reformation movement as well. When Luther started re-evaluating some core Roman Catholic beliefs and practices, some of his contemporaries threw out everything after the NT was written and tried to start over. That meant they threw out the expression of doctrines like Chalcedonian Christology which describes the Incarnation and they threw out Trinity. The social unrest of the day was often expressed in antagonism to the Church and the people were quick to believe that the Church had been holding out on them. It was a little like the people a few years ago who were quick to believe the Da Vinci Code's premise that the Church had squashed information for thousands of years about Jesus. Their antagonism to the institutional church meant they were quick to believe anyone who challenged it on any front. That same thing was going on in the 16th century too.

When we move forward a few centuries to our own time, Trinity Sunday has a bit of a problem in that same way in contemporary culture. To some it really sounds like we are celebrating the mother of all voters meetings. In 325 AD, shortly after unifying the empire under his control the first Christian emperor, Constantine, summoned the Bishops of the empire to settle a question which had vexed the churches of Christendom for decades. There were riots in the streets of Alexandria and other places over just how Jesus was understood to be in relationship to the Father. Constantine, it must be remembered, had reorganized the whole empire and ascended to the throne in the face of a dramatic threat to the integrity of the empire from barbarians who either sought to storm the gates or more often simply move in and start farming. He could ill afford to have the Christians at each other's throats behind him. They were half the empire's population.

There was much more to this than simply politics. Constantine was genuinely interested and he really did see himself in some very religious terms. He thought of himself as a savior of the people of God. He had stopped the persecutions and they loved him for it. Eusebius' *History of the Church* praised him effusively as an agent of God. Here was another rescue to effect. Here was a tangible way for the empire and the emperor to be supportive of his faith.

At Nicea the issue at hand revolved around the understanding of the relationship of Jesus to the Father. In fact, the Holy Spirit hardly even came up in the discussion. When the assembled bishops wrote the creed, the Third Article was simply "I believe in the Holy Spirit." This failure

to settle the questions of the Holy Spirit then set in motion a whole other dispute about the relationship of the Spirit to the Father and Son. That second dispute would culminate in another council summoned by another devout emperor, Theodosius in 381 and that resulted in the third article of the Nicene Creed. Constantine's council which met in Nicea, a suburb of his new capitol, would produce the second article of that creed which also bears that city's name.

Actually the proper name for the creed is the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. You can see why we call it simply the Nicene. But you should be aware that while many speak of the council at Nicea, we are commemorating both Nicea (325) and Constantinople I (381), two different councils which are important to the Christian confession of the Trinity.

When the Bishops of Christendom gathered in Nicea, there were a number of competing ideas floating around about the nature of Christ. Some, and we don't know quite how many, held the orthodox position which you and I confess today. That Jesus and the Father are One and yet Two separate persons, in a union which defies understanding, but which we confess by saying that Jesus is God and the Father is God, but there are not two Gods. We know that Athanasius and his Bishop, Alexander, were in that camp. If you are a Deacon, this is a great day, by the way. Athanasius, who formulated the theology which won the day at Nicea and the Nicene Creed was a Deacon! He was not the one who held Episcopal authority. Of course, some things have not changed, as a Deacon he was not allowed to speak at the council. His Bishop did the talking. But Athanasius was the genius behind those speeches.

Some, and this was a very few, held to a modalistic view. This is akin to how Unitarians speak of Jesus today. God is a singularity, and the differences between the Father and the Son are simply modes of his appearance. Sometimes he looks like the obedient Son, sometimes like the ruling Father, but essentially this is the same person occupying different roles. There were several versions of this, and they usually fell under the title of Sabellianism, the name of a leading proponent.

The majority seemed to follow an idea proposed by Arius, another deacon in the Church in Antioch. He and Athanasius had been carrying on a considerable war of words in the decade leading up to the conference, despite bitter persecutions raging at the time in the east. In an effort to confess the unity of God but maintain the distinction between the Father and the Son. Arius held that they were not one, but simply united in purpose. The Logos, what we would call the second person of the Trinity, was actually the first creation of God, the pre-eminent creation of God, through Whom God had created all the rest of the creation, but there was a qualitative difference between the Father and the Son. The Son was not God.

Both of these ideas were critiqued by the pugnacious and brilliant deacon in Alexandria, Athanasius. (The picture at the right is the current and recently built cathedral of the Archbishop of the Coptic Church in Egypt, the very same body



of believers of which Athanasius was a deacon and then Bishop. This the same group which has been undergoing great persecutions in the recent past. Most of the Christian men who were martyred by the Mediterranean Sea on the gruesome video put out by the jihadists were Coptic Christians.) They also called Athanasius the “Black Dwarf” so if you have any African Americans in your congregation you might want to encourage them with that little factotum. The architect of the creed we confess on Sunday mornings was not only a Deacon, but he was African, dark, and vertically challenged.

Athanasius and the many who agreed with him, held that both Sabellianism and Arianism had serious problems when it came to describing the cross event. Sabellianism left you wondering who raised Jesus from the dead if the Father died that day. If the Father did not die and Sabellius is right, then God did not die either, and thus sins are not really paid for. That debt can only be paid by God.

Arianism had a similar problem. If Jesus was not truly God, in all the fullness of the deity, the death he died upon the cross was insufficient. The death of a creature could not be the cosmically significant event which restored the whole creation to God.

Arius held that he was the bulwark against Sabellianism and that Athanasius was really a form of Sabellianism in disguise and nice language. There did not appear to be many Sabellians and we don't really know what they thought. But Athanasius was quite sure that he was not a Sabellian. The fighting in the Eastern part of Christianity grew to be quite sharp.

Constantine invited and gathered the bishops, locked them in a room, stationed imperial legionaries outside the door and said, “Make up your minds, and I will make sure that we all agree when we are done.” The council was hardly a model for how to develop theology. The Emperor, who was not yet baptized at this point, was quite active, even presiding at a number of the sessions personally. The threat of the imperial power hung over the whole thing as Roman Legionaries were stationed at the doors. It is easy to forget that for some of these bishops these same legionaries had been persecuting Christians less than five years prior. Some of those bishops bore the scars from torture. This is akin to having Stasi security guards at a church conference in eastern Germany in 1993. There were some really bad memories floating around in that room.

The council will set some really ugly precedents. The emperor calls the bishops and they come. For the first time politics has gotten involved in this whole affair, at least politics of the state. Many have seen this as an unfortunate turning point for Christian history. In fact, within a generation Christians will be having second thoughts about this. The monastic movement will seek to radically withdraw from the political life of the society. For the next 800 years, a purer Christianity will be seen as withdrawal from the world and the institutionally corrupted Church into the purity of a monastery or nunnery where one can pray and serve God. It is likely that this movement, which was birthed in the generation which followed Nicea, reflects a yearning for the

day when you could die for being a Christian, but also for a day when Christianity was not tainted by a connection to the state.

The debate was hardly a model of Christian charity either. It was quite acrimonious at times. One of the delates, a certain Nicholas of Myra, got a fist to the nose, breaking it. Of course, he would later become the basis for St. Nicholas of Christmas fame. You know it is a rough meeting when Santa Claus gets his nose broken! Lots of charges of heresy were leveled and the politicking was considerable. Sounds a little like an LCMS convention, doesn't it? In fact, with all the district conventions going on this year, one might want to make that connection.

And yet, we will call this a holy day. We will confess that the same Spirit which blew through the disciples on Pentecost was active that day, and that same Spirit is active in our conventions and voters meetings and other administriva of the Church. How can we possibly do that? It is an act of faith, which if it was obvious the Spirit was there, we would not be dealing with Faith, but it is still a tough call to make, and one which is increasingly coming under suspicion and criticism in this post-modern age. Again, I point you to the recent Pew Research study which suggests that many are checking out of organized religion. They are not less spiritual, or so they claim, but they have little use for the institution which has grown so acrimonious. But it has not grown that way, it has always been that way. I am not so sure that the logic of "they are always fighting" and that is why the young people are leaving is true.

So how do we preach this day?

Do we need to posit a distinction between the Church and God today? Does Trinity help us do that? The doctrine of Trinity forces the Church into a very humble intellectual position. We really can only say that we don't know some of these things. We can confess trinity, but we cannot say we grasp or understand it.

Do we preach against the idolatry of "Church"?

1. God is bigger than our understanding – we have imperfect understanding.
2. We have imperfect response to God – we do not get it right. Our worship is always flawed, our prayers are never perfect. We do not have a perfect governance and we have to admit we may have made terrible mistakes.
3. We cannot, dare not, suggest that we alone are right.
4. This is an occasion for God's mercy. That mercy must start with us. We cannot arrogantly suggest that we are "right" ones.

The alternative suggests that we need to prioritize the relational aspect of our faith over against the doctrinal. And yet, this sounds so "American" – particularly in the face of the Wesleyan/pietistic de-emphasis on doctrine and the emphasis on personal piety/religion. The pietists were concerned that the orthodox Christians of the 17th and 18th centuries had checked off all the doctrinal boxes but their faith did not seem to have any effect upon their lives. The

pietism movement was necessary in so far as their critique was correct, but the solution which they proposed has led to a great deal of mischief.

Walther's solution which founded the LCMS here was to be both doctrinal and pious. He called it Confessionalism. How do we make a seemingly esoteric sermon on the Trinity into something which is relational without jettisoning the doctrine? The LCMS was founded on this very question. We assert that there are truths and they are important, but we do not lose sight of the reason for those truths. The genius of the Lutheran Confessions is that they consistently remember the state of the sinner before God. They were interested in what that person was feeling, thinking, saying, doing. The doctrine served that person, not the other way around.

The term "Confessional" has been hijacked in the LCMS today by some who bandy the term but have lost sight of the sinner whose conscience and eternal salvation was paramount for the authors of the Confessions. The Book of Concord (BOC) has become a doctrinal club which is wielded in the cause of orthodox purity. I believe that doctrinal purity in the service of love is the noblest of pursuits, but when that pursuit has lost sight of love and the beloved of God, it is monstrous. True confessionalism maintains that balance. It is hard and we make mistakes. And we are under the grace of God.

Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, You have given us grace to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity by the confession of a true faith and to worship the Unity in the power of the Divine Majesty. Keep us steadfast in this faith and defend us from all adversities; For You, O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, live and reign, one God, now and forever.

God, Almighty and Everlasting, has given us a gift to acknowledge the glory of the Trinity and to worship the Unity. This is a content laden prayer which demands a little thought on the part of the one doing the praying. It is a grace thing, a gift, that we can acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity. This is not something that we would have arrived at by our own reason or strength. It is not the case, as it is in physics for instance, that we are talking about a very technical subject which the artists and the practitioners of the field understand but we don't. This is not a situation where if we just tried hard enough, went to school long enough, or read the right books, we could figure this out. No, the acknowledgement of the Trinity, be it by the greatest theological mind or the seven year old who is considering the illustration of an apple, these are always gifts of God. We cannot forget that part.

What that means is that we are dealing with a different sort of Truth here, different than the truth which we normally encounter in our educational endeavors. When we learn the truth of physics or mathematics or history or geology, we arrive at those truths via a certain way of learning. Ever since the enlightenment, we have striven to arrive at Truth in those fields by the use of the scientific method. We gather and systematize data, we notice patterns in the data, we make

hypotheses regarding those patterns, we test the hypothesis, and we analyze those results and postulate new hypotheses. It is a constant quest for Truth which every scientist worth his salt will tell you is never fully achieved. We understand so much more about the nature of the physical world today than our grandparents do, and yet, every time we learn more, it opens up a whole new vista of discovery and potential for us.

The truth of Trinity is not like that but sometimes it sounds like the scientist. We have been given a gift of knowledge, of Truth which transcends these processes. The problem here is not that we are on a constant quest for more Truth; rather, in this situation, we have it and are not quite sure what to do with it. Both the theologian and the scientist must come to the discussion of our fields with a measure of humility. The scientist realizes he only knows in part and must always question his conclusion. The theologian realizes that he knows in full but has no understanding of his acknowledgement nor the ability to articulate in a way which does not immediately cause another problem. Thus, the theological quest is not to discover the truth but to describe it. For that we need a whole other set of tools than the scientist and the enlightenment scholar in their quest to discover. We need imagination. We need art. We need beauty. We need story, not factota. In the same way that I don't get to know my wife more by measuring her, analyzing data, and formulating hypotheses, likewise this is not how I articulate the knowledge of God.

Norman Nagel used to say that when we come to the issue of salvation we have to throw math out the window. We cannot access some of this via the same methodologies we use to arrive at other truths. But all truths, both the scientific and the theological, but also the literary, philosophical, and every other truth, ultimately attest to the one who is the Way the Truth and the Life!

This truth is acknowledged by a confession of the true faith. Please pay close attention to this word: confession. Confession does not ask one to get the articulation of the Trinity right, as if we could do that with human language, nor is it comprehending the Trinity. To confess this Truth is to confess it to be Truth, what it is. I do not understand, my articulation of it is always flawed, but I believe and I confess. This is the gift. A brilliant theologian whose name we don't even know, he wrote under a pseudonym, Dionysius, in the fifth century brilliantly explained this strange feature of language. The words as descriptions of God always fail, and yet because they are tools in the hands of God they become sacramental, vehicles for God to convey far more Truth about himself than the words themselves, of themselves mean. It is a little like taking a wafer into your mouth and receiving the Lord of the whole universe. You know the wafer as bread, simple bread, but you believe it is so much more and you experience so much more.

I am also gifted to worship the Unity in the power of the Divine Majesty. This is also important and I fear we do not pay enough attention here. In many things, we simply cannot discern the different members of the Trinity. Who sends the rain upon the righteous and the wicked? Is it the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit? We simply cannot tell. We must say "God did that." The only way to tell the difference between the members of the Trinity is in the economy of salvation. The

Father sends the Son in order to redeem his fallen creation; the Son willingly obeys, dies, and rises again on that mission. The Father and the Son pour out the Spirit upon the world to infuse it with the relationship which Christ has won on that cross. Our worship is not of the Father, or the Son, or the Spirit, but it is of God. Yes, we pray in this Trinitarian name, and we note that God has most fully revealed himself in this strange mystery, but we ultimately worship God, the unity, the singular One who is and has the divine majesty. In Aquinas' words, he is simple, he is pure act. There is no potentiality there, only pure thought, action, being. There is no "becoming" in God.

We pray finally, after all that, that God would keep us steadfast in that faith and preserve us from all adversities. It almost sounds anticlimactic, which should give us a little clue about this day. The day is much more about ascription and praise than it is about moral imperatives, repentance, evangelism, mission, or anything else that usually occupies us. The weight of this prayer is in the ascription, not the petition.

Isaiah 6:1-8

¹In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ²Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³And one called to another and said:

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"

⁴And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. ⁵And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

⁶Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

⁸And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here am I! Send me."

In the year that Uzziah died... Uzziah, also known as Ahaziah, was a good king; although, the high places were not torn down. It appears that he was struck by some sort of leprosy and he ruled with his son Jotham for a period. His reign was particularly long, 52 years, only exceeded by his thoroughly wicked great grandson Manasseh who ruled for 55 years. (Jotham and good king Hezekiah were between them.)

Some have suggested that Isaiah somehow had to wait until Uzziah died to speak. The ascription to his book in chapter 1:1 says that he saw the visions in the reign of Uzziah, but this seems like a scholarly discussion without much point.

Isaiah was probably a member of the royal family. His book clearly evidences a sophisticated education which would have likely only been available to a member of a noble family. He also, see chapter 7, seems to have unrestricted access to the king. Some have postulated that he was a cousin of some sort. It is a speculation however.

Interestingly Isaiah locates his call vision here in chapter six, after five chapters of rather depressing and distressing prophecy. He introduces one of his major themes, the remnant theology, and speaks of the destruction of Israel and Judah. In chapter five he likens the nation of Judah to a vineyard which is producing sour grapes despite the best viticulture practices.

Isaiah has a vision while in the temple. That is in itself something significant. Remember the collect connects this to worship. He is there to worship and suddenly sees behind the altar rail and the altar, behind the sacrament and the stained glass, he sees heaven itself and the God he sees is huge. The hem of his robe fills the temple. The whole place is shaken by the praise of the beings who are before his throne. What beings they are too: Seraphs, which in Hebrew is the word for “burning ones.”

Isaiah’s reaction is quite normal. He is terrified. His articulation of his terror is interesting because he realizes that God is holy and he is not. He is in the presence of the Ancient of days and the Holy One of Israel and he is a man of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips.

One of the seraphs brings a coal, in tongs, (when a burning angel need tongs to pick something up, you know it’s hot!) He touches Isaiah’s lips and cleanses him, declaring his sin forgiven. It is interesting that forgiveness comes at a cost, through an act which is considered torture by most standards. Sound familiar?

Isaiah is then transformed. He was the wallflower hoping the melt into the back ground and not be seen lest he die. Now he is the eager volunteer, virtually jumping up with his hand raised, “Send me! Send me!” what has made the difference? Of course it is the angel with the burning coal who has made the difference in Isaiah. His sins are forgiven. He is no longer afraid.

Why do we have this text today? Probably because the angels sing “holy, holy, holy...” Many patristic and faithful theologians have mused Trinitarian thoughts when they heard Isaiah record that three-fold holiness. It could be, it might not be. The preacher will not want to push that too far in a context of Trinitarian doubts. The skeptic will not be convinced by that argument but the one who already believes may be edified.

The other interesting intersection for this is that we sing this as part of our liturgy. The Sanctus starts with this and ends with the songs of praise sung when Jesus entered Jerusalem. Interesting in its placement, this song is sung at the beginning of the communion liturgy, right after the prayer called the Proper Preface. (I always love that prayer, but I so seldom hear it anymore.)

It seems that when we confess God is present, we are supposed to sing. It is a dangerous sort of place so we sing with the angels and the people who welcome Jesus to save them. They did not

get zapped, so we sing those songs. The Sanctus is really a statement that we are like Isaiah in the presence of God.

Trinity Sunday is not about us understanding God but perhaps about us standing the presence of God, in the midst of his holiness. It should terrify us, it should fry us, as Isaiah fears, but the whole goal of this day is to touch us with the holiness of God. We might preach a sermon which seeks to have the hearer running down the aisle like Isaiah here, shouting, "Pick me!"

Psalm 29

¹Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

²Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness.

³The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the LORD, over many waters.

⁴The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.

⁵The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.

⁶He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.

⁷The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire. ⁸The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

⁹The voice of the LORD makes the deer give birth
and strips the forests bare,
and in his temple all cry, "Glory!"

¹⁰The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.

¹¹May the LORD give strength to his people!
May the LORD bless his people with peace!

This psalm is an interesting and good choice for this day. It does not deal with the Trinity directly, but it does in another way. The psalmist urges us to ascribe to God all the power and glory. Here we speak of the worship of the unity. But then it launches into a description of what the "voice of the LORD" does. But John tells us that the logos, the dabar, the Word of God is Jesus.

The LORD blesses the people with peace.

Acts 2:14a, 22-36 (I have include the omitted verses from last week)

¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: *"Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. ¹⁵For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. ¹⁶But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel:*

¹⁷ *"And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,*

*and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams;*

¹⁸*even on my male servants and female servants
in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.*

¹⁹*And I will show wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,*

blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke;

²⁰*the sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,*

before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day.

²¹*And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.'*

²²"Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—

²³this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. ²⁴ God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. ²⁵For David says concerning him,

"I saw the Lord always before me,
for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken;

²⁶therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;
my flesh also will dwell in hope.

²⁷For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,
or let your Holy One see corruption.

²⁸You have made known to me the paths of life;
you will make me full of gladness with your presence.'

²⁹"Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. ³⁰ Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, ³¹he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. ³²This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. ³³ Being

therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. ³⁴For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says,

"The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand,
³⁵until I make your enemies your footstool.'

³⁶Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."

This is a great text for this day. It is of course the continuation of that sermon we heard last week, but it also has all three members of the Trinity active within the text. The Spirit is there in the flames and the bold sermon, Jesus is the subject and at the end, God the Father has raised him, making him both Lord and Christ. That Lord phrase is really the one that you want to focus on there. That was a charged word for a faithful Jew of the first century and today. That was a God word.

This is one of the reasons we say that the Trinity is revealed in the economy of Salvation in our discussion of the Collect for the Day.

If you want to preach/teach the doctrine of Trinity, this is your text.

But also notice how this section of the sermon ends. "You crucified..." Peter's words are not just a teaching about God, it is a God who is in contact with and in some conflict with these people. They have a God problem! They killed God's Holy One, and the Holy One did not stay dead. They took their best shot and it failed. The only course of action is to sue for mercy.

Will our preaching of Trinity bring people to that point? Should it? Have we tamed God by talking about him, and not letting him talk to his rebellious creatures through us, call them to account, and call them to his solution in Christ?

John 3:1-17

¹Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." ³Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" ⁵Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

⁹Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

If this sounds particularly familiar, we had much of this text, including the famous 3:16 passage on the Fourth Sunday in Lent. There we picked up at vs 14 and continued past this through to verse 21.

Nicodemus comes at night. That is significant, John often calls Jesus the Light of the world. The darkness in John's theology is for sin and evil. Nicodemus comes at night, covering up, hiding. He is in the dark. He is a ruler of the Jews, but he is of the dark. He flatters Jesus and Jesus responds by accusing him. If one is not born again, you cannot even see the kingdom. Nicodemus, you are in the dark, you cannot see in the dark.

Nicodemus is dense here. We get what Jesus means by rebirth, but Nicodemus does not. He thinks Jesus is speaking of a physical rebirth through a natural process. Jesus says this birth is by water and Spirit, which has led many a Christian to contemplate Baptism, and rightly so. Jesus says that is the way the Spirit does it. The Spirit, like the wind, blows where it wants. Remember last week when Ezekiel had the vision of the dry bones and we noted that the Hebrew word for Spirit, wind and breath were the same? It works that way in Greek too. Jesus is making the same pun, it might literally be the same pun since it is likely that this conversation was conducted in Aramaic and we are getting a translation of it through John. The Greek word Pneuma can be all three, wind, spirit, and breath, and Jesus is punning on that here. Then he really gets on Nicodemus' case. He is a teacher who cannot explain or accept the simplest of things. How can he hope to be a teacher? Jesus has spoken of earthly things and he has not gotten, how can he hope to see the heavenly things.

But is Nicodemus any worse than the rest of us? Really?

There is a really interesting little thing that happens in verse 11. The number of the "you" changes. Greek, unlike English, had the ability, by the form of the verb and the pronoun, to indicate whether one was talking to one "you" or two or more "you's." Truly ancient Greek (Homeric) even had a dual form which allowed one to know if there were one, two, or more than two "you's" on the other side of that conversation. What all this Greek suggests to us is that there is an audience shift that happens at this point. Think of watching this little tableau on TV

unfolding before you, and suddenly Jesus turns to the camera and starts addressing you and the rest of the viewing audience.

The bronze serpent reference in verse 14 immerses us in deep water. Jesus likens himself to this problematic and strange story which is such a challenge for the reader to understand and, as we noted above, leaves us with many questions. Jesus tells us that looking at him in faith is to have eternal life. Are these the heavenly things which Nicodemus cannot understand or are they earthly things, or is this really just an accommodation to the fact that he cannot understand them? And verse 16, perhaps the most commonly memorized verse in all the Bible, is that part of the heavenly stuff or the earthly?

When we read verse 16, do we say that God loved the world so much that he gave his only begotten Son? Or do we say that God loved the world this way: he gave his only begotten son? Is the emphasis on the amount of the love or on the mode of loving? How do we understand the “so” in the first phrase of verse 16?

Some emphasized the “so much” way to read it. Others look at it the other way.

We also wondered what the “World” was that was saved. Is it the people? Is it the whole cosmos? Is it the system of the world in which we live? Is this a restoration of the relationships we all enjoy and endure together? We have to pull into verse 16 the content of verse 17. To read one without the other seems to seriously miss the point.

Phil’s literal wooden translation of the text: Thus did God love world: he gave his only Son.

I John 4:9-10 seems to clarify this for us:

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

If we take that change in number seriously, it is no longer Jesus talking to Nicodemus but now in fact John is talking to us. Is John, frustrated with his audience, telling his audience that the story he has just told them in which Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night is in fact an earthly story and they are not getting it? How can his Gospel go into the real content he has in mind? Has John’s audience, like the Pharisees of old, not received the testimony? If this is the case, should our editor put in a paragraph break at verse 11 and is the “Truly, truly,…” the beginning of a new conversation John is having with the audience? (Remember the ancient manuscripts did not have any punctuation, paragraph markers, or even spaces between the words.)

Now, before we make too much of this, it is also possible to say that Jesus is expanding the reference here to include the whole group of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, the friends of Nicodemus.

Perhaps the final conclusion of this whole discussion is the reality that this text may not be as cut and dried as we like to make it out to be. An exegetical humility is called for here. But the preacher needs to stand in that pulpit and say something. Schwaffling around and hemming and hawing is not going to cut it. You will have to decide what you want to do with this, but don't do it in a way that it precludes another understanding of the text. Offer up an interpretation and application, but don't feel the need to condemn or otherwise reject what another says. God's Spirit blows where and when he wants to, says Jesus. Don't constrain him only to blow in your ways.

Most likely, if we choose to preach this text, we will pretty much lift it out of context and simply preach it as the Word of God to us. And that is not a bad way to take it. It works. John 3:16 is just so attractive, often called the Gospel in a nutshell, a nugget which summarizes the whole Biblical message. God so loved the world he gave his son so that all who believe might have eternal life. For God is not interested in destroying the world. That is not his desire. He wants to save the world. He loves the world, you see. So much for that wrathful and scary God that a lot of people seem to conceptualize. The operating economy of salvation here is faith. God does this through believing. Whoever believes is already saved. Whoever does not believe, is already condemned. This is not a matter of what one does, it is a matter of what one is.

The judgment is not based on some relative scale or whether one met the societal standard of acceptable behavior. The criterion of judgment is the relationship to Christ. The word for believe here is "pistis" not actually belief but the word for faith, that relationship with God in which God saves us. The contrast with belief should be maintained even though English doesn't have the vocabulary that allows for it. One can believe without trust, but faith implies that the belief results in trust. I can believe that the pilot will fly the plane to Denver. It is another thing to board the thing and put my life in his hands. To disbelieve (un-pistis) the Christ is to reject the very name of the only begotten son of God. The one who rejects the light and flees to the darkness like some cockroach is in fact a cockroach. He loves the evil, and he does not want his life to see the light of day. He covers it up, either by doing things in secret or by the layers of deception and secrecy which stifle countless people even today. He who comes into the light wants his life to be exposed, wants it to be seen, because it really is not his life that is seen, it is the life which is in God which is seen. As Paul will say in Romans, it is the righteousness of God which is revealed in our lives, we have no room to boast here except in Christ.

Law

1. God is big, really big. I cannot understand him. He is just too complex for my puny little brain to get around.

2. Knowledge, understanding is power and not knowing or understanding God puts me into a position of weakness that I don't like. I cannot manipulate Him. That frightens me.
3. This is really a problem because God is the very definition of life. My life has this nasty propensity to end in death. I need some of the God power stuff or I am in serious trouble. It does not seem to be for sale, it does not seem to be something I can take or manipulate. This does not look good. How else do I know to get it?
4. Knowledge and the power it brings me lets me do so much in this life. I can drive very fast, I can talk to people around the world, I can take an antibiotic and the infection that might have killed my great grandfather is cured. That sort of power has made me very comfortable and accustomed to using it. I like being in control and I don't like being out of control one little bit. In fact, I might just rather die than lose control or admit that I am not in control.

Gospel

1. God is really big, it is true, but he was once really small. A fetus in a peasant girl's womb as she made her way to Bethlehem to be counted and give birth. God has cut through the mystery and the complexity to reveal himself to me in that babe and the man he grew to be and the death he died and the life he now lives, fully human. He has crossed the divide that I cannot.
2. It is true I cannot manipulate God, but that is also the good news here. He has given me everything I might want and much more. His crossing the great barrier between us means that he brings with him the very gifts which I cannot achieve of my own.
3. The greatest gift, the gift of himself, means that he has imbued my life with genuine immortality. He has taken up residence in my life through the outpouring of the Spirit in Baptism. Just as he has conquered death, so too his victory has become mine. God has enthroned him in heavenly glory, and I am sitting there with him because a real human heart beats in his chest, he sees with real and human eyes and hears with real and human ears. He stands with me at every funeral and sheds real and human tears far more precious and authentic than any gem.
4. God helps me lose control. Sometimes he takes away the things I trust in, sometimes he makes me weak. Sometimes he just blasts me with problems, but in many and various ways he reminds me that the power I wield is an illusion fabricated by an enemy who will one day pull the veil aside and I will see that my fallen nature and this worldly life have always been in his clutches. And so Jesus reminds me now and gives me the faith which trusts in him and delights in his gifts and even gives me a name by which I may call him, a name to which he will always answer: Trinity. When we pray in that name, to the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit, God hears us, he always hears us.

Sermon Ideas

1. The Trinity: Acts Text: “This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.”

(That the hearer would with joy confess the Trinity with God’s people of every time and place.)

This is really a sermon which seeks to teach trinity and why it is important. This is not just some obscure doctrine, but a statement of the very heart of the Gospel. It is the underpinning of the whole forgiveness of sins. God the Father has sent the Son to us. Jesus, the second person of the Trinity obeyed his father and died on a cross for our sins, uniting himself with me in the day of my greatest need. He finds me in the one place where he knows he can find me, in my grave. He has been there before, it is no strange place to Him. The Father who created me, the Son who redeemed me, the Spirit who has sanctified me all participate in my true life. What we say about the Trinity says a great deal about forgiveness itself, in fact the trinity and forgiveness could be seen as really synonyms of a sort. This is the sort of sermon that remembers that the Spirit of God was at work in this world and remains so. Theologically educated and astute Christians are necessary tools for him to use in the conversion of the lost and the protection of the faithful. We will teach them in this sermon about the Trinity. We might approach this simply by teaching our people about the history and the issues which lead to the formulation of the Nicene Creed which we confess.

But this sermon will need to remember the rioting folks in Alexandria so many years ago. It mattered to them just who was on the cross. They fought for the right words to express that and we have their words. They fought so hard because this Jesus on a cross makes a huge difference for us. Jesus on the cross, Jesus risen from the dead, he is God, and that means when he rises he helps us, he pours out that Holy Spirit, he makes this life right now truly significant and important. I can forgive my enemy, love him, and he can be changed because of Trinity. Without Trinity, if Jesus is not really God, none of that can happen.

2. He has bridged the Gap! (Gospel – John 3:16 God sent the Son! That the hearer would rejoice to confess that the Father has sent the Son, the Son has obeyed, suffered, and died, and now pours out the Spirit that we may confess, see, believe, and have life!)

Sin has rendered me helpless and I don’t like it. But praise be to God the Father! He has sent his Son, and that Son having run his course has returned to heavenly glory and poured out the third member of the trinity, the Spirit. Today, because that Spirit is poured

out, I can confess the truth of God, He has loved this creation despite its rebellion and sent Jesus. Jesus has done the holy deed, restored and reconciled the whole creation, and now we are united with God through the Spirit. This is not always easy to see, but God's love is great and he will not abandon those for whom he has died. Just look how much better off we are than Nicodemus, and look at how he was given courage by the end of Jesus life to go and request the body of Jesus with Joseph. The light had already begun to shine in Nicodemus' heart, just as it has shone in your heart in the waters of your baptism and the preaching and teaching and fellowship and love which have shaped your life. God has accomplished that which we could not. He has bridged the great divide which separated the sinners like Isaiah from himself. Not with a coal of fire applied to the lips, but with nails applied to his own incarnate hands, with water applied to your head and mine.

This sermon will tie God's rescue of the fallen world to the Trinity. The act of rescuing the world has revealed the very nature of God to us. We see his "Threeness" in the actions of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

3. Except one confess this faith... (from the Athanasian Creed)

The Christian faith asserts that the Trinity is essential to being a Christian. A denial of the Trinity is a denial of the Christian faith! Why do we say that? It seems like such a harsh and narrow minded thing to say. But it really is not. In fact, to say it any other way, either modalism or arianism is to give us a false hope and to eviscerate forgiveness itself. Forgiveness is what is on the line with Trinity, nothing less. This all returns to the question of who was on the cross on the day that Jesus died. Modalism says God takes multiple forms and modes, but there is only one God. If that is the case who died on the cross? To whom was Jesus speaking when he commended his Spirit into the hands of the Father? He could not have been God, or if he was God who raised him from the dead? If it was not God on the cross are my sins really forgiven? Are yours? Arianism suggests that Jesus is not really God, he is a high creation, a really good man, a great moral teacher, something, anything, just not quite God. There was a time when he was not, said Arius. But here we return to the same problem. If it was not God's blood which dripped onto that Palestinian soil, what hope do we have? Is the death of some angelic being really enough? Are you sure?

Thus today we confess Trinity, and in the confession of this strange and inexplicable doctrine we also proclaim the forgiveness and life which transformed Isaiah and Peter and you and me. We preach Christ crucified, a mystery. God was on that cross and that makes all the difference in the world.

4. Here am I, send me! (OT lesson – That the holiness of God would infuse the hearer with both holy awe and holy joy.)

Isaiah found himself in the presence of God. Today we find ourselves in the very heart of God's nature revealed to us. What are we doing here? Isaiah thought he was about to die, a sinful man in the presence of a holy God. But it did not work out that way. God dispatched his seraphim with burning coal to Isaiah, purging his sin, rendering him holy.

The preacher will want to talk baptism here. Baptism is where this touch of God came to us. In a Trinitarian name we were baptized and God washed away our sins, adopting us as his own children. Our lips are not touched by hot coals. Our foreheads are wet with the cool water of baptism. I will take that over seraphic scalding any day!

Isaiah was transformed by that touch into a totally different person. Where he had been trying to hide under the furniture lest he be observed, now he was eagerly volunteering. God has also brought us today into the very center of his kingdom, his very heart. We are in the presence of the Holy God here. Like Isaiah, we should be afraid to be here. But we are not. For we have learned something. God has not come to destroy but to save. Jesus' words in the Gospel lesson have been taken to heart. God has come to render us holy. No flying angel will come and touch our lips today, but the body and blood of Christ, broken and shed on a cross, will pass these lips and the effect will be the same. An unclean people of unclean lips will be cleansed and made holy.

We have a tendency to think of holiness as something which we would render impure by our sin. As if the holiness of God is tainted by our sin. Instead the traffic runs the other way. God's holiness comes to us. We do not achieve holiness, we receive it. God's holiness is seen in his rendering us holy.

This sermon might make a great kick off to the many needs a congregation will see in the coming months. VBS, Summer Sunday School, perhaps officers are elected, etc. I would exercise some caution here. Don't make God's holiness a tool for institutional advancement, but at the same time, you would be preaching the text to suggest that Isaiah is volunteering here. I think here is where you want to put the joy into sermon. Isaiah's fear is replaced by an eager joy. God has changed something here.