



Liturgical Day: The Festival of the Holy Trinity

Date: June 7, 2009

Sermon Title: Who Is God?

Grace to you and Peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Nicodemus was a man who lived in the first century A.D., when Jesus was making his way from village to village with his followers. Nicodemus was well known and respected by the other religious leaders of his day, and he held a high position in Jewish religious society. But he had heard about Jesus, and was curious about him. Nicodemus was no fool – he knew there were many of his colleagues who were dead set against Jesus, and already working to do away with him, so he was very careful in approaching Jesus. He didn't approach him in the Temple where he was day after day, and where his colleagues might see him. But instead, he came by at night – when he could have a private audience with Jesus, without letting anyone else know. Nicodemus asked Jesus what it was that stood at the center of life.

Jesus told Nicodemus that God was one who desired a radical change in his life. God wanted to be a part of his story in a way that made him a new man. Like a wayward breeze that kicked life back into the dying embers of a fire – God wished to blow into the life of Nicodemus with such intensity that it seemed as powerful as the day he was first born.

Jesus said to Nicodemus, this practical, educated, world-wise person, "God wishes to create a new Nicodemus, one born of the spirit; one dedicated to a life of love and hope; one who believes in the gracious promises that God has to offer." Jesus said, "Listen. That is why I came. Not to judge you or the world, but that you might be saved through me." This story had a good ending. Nicodemus did believe, and eventually was able to come around in broad daylight to see his Lord. When the world had turned against Jesus, Nicodemus was there, faithfully seeking to do for Jesus when he was dead what he couldn't do for him when he was alive. And there is no doubt that when he heard word that Jesus had been raised, it was the best news he had ever heard.

Athanasius was a man who lived in the fourth century A.D., when the Christian church was becoming a world-wide institution – the official religion of the Holy Roman Empire. In those days, people asked, "Who is God?" Athanasius was one of those who tried to help them discover an answer that would make a difference in their lives. There were people in those days who claimed that God was many. They believed that one God created the world and all that exists; that this God was an evil God, who created a world of pain and trouble. But then another God came along, God the father of Jesus Christ; and it was this God – the good God – who brings life and love and hope.

Athanasius saw very clearly that this teaching was dangerous. Not only was it false, but it led people away from the true God, and so Athanasius spoke up. With great courage, and in spite of considerable personal risk, he told the story of God. That God was the one who created the world, and all that is in it. That the same God called Noah to faithfulness, and because of his faith, saved his family from death. The same God called Abraham and Sarah to leave their home, and become God's chosen people Israel. The same God traveled with Joseph to Egypt, and again with Moses out of Egypt. The same God was with King David, and the Prophet Isaiah, as they sought to guide God's people. This same God was the Father of Jesus, the Christ, the Risen Lord. This same God is present in

the here-and-now, provoking those who would believe to works of love and kindness; and will be present into the future, to give hope and confidence

FIRST LESSON

ISAIAH 6:1-8

PSALM

PSALM 29

SECOND LESSON

ROMANS 8:12-17

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. JOHN 3:1-17

PRAYER OF THE DAY

**ALMIGHTY CREATOR AND
EVER-LIVING GOD: WE
WORSHIP YOUR GLORY,
ETERNAL THREE-IN-ONE,
AND WE PRAISE YOUR
POWER, MAJESTIC ONE-IN-
THREE. KEEP US
STEADFAST IN THIS FAITH,
DEFEND US IN ALL
ADVERSITY, AND BRING US
AT LAST INTO YOUR
PRESENCE, WHERE YOU
LIVE IN ENDLESS JOY AND
LOVE, FATHER, SON, AND
HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD,
NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.**

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to those who would embrace the faith. Athanasius told the story of God with great power and confidence – and helped the people to understand that through knowing God one can experience salvation. He taught them that believing this story, and letting it infect their lives, was a matter of life and death. And that if they want to enter life eternal, they could do so by embracing this catholic, all inclusive understanding of God. His teaching was so compelling, and his witness was so bold, that they named one of the great church creeds after him.

Peter was a young man I met a few years ago. He is in his mid to late 30's, is married, and has two children. His family is similar to many of our families. They lived the typically busy, over-scheduled suburban life. There were many positive influences in their lives – among those influences was Peter's church, and the other families who were part of that congregation. It was a full life, and they were thankful for much that they were able to experience.

But three years ago, life took some unfortunate turns for Peter and his family, and it captured his attention. After a long battle with cancer, his father passed away. A down-turn in business left him in a very uncertain position at work – a reality that he had never experienced before. There were a couple of particularly challenging years with his 13 year-old daughter. Peter was struggling, and came to realize that he couldn't do it on his own.

He turned to a close friend at church. Peter shared with his friend what he was struggling with, and his friend listened. After a time, his friend prayed for him, and offered him a couple of Bible passages that had been helpful to him in difficult times. He invited Peter to join him for a regular men's gathering that took place at his church, and Peter was just desperate enough to attend.

That was a significant turning point in Peter's life. He came to realize that his attempt to involve so many different influences in his life was causing him to pay far less attention than he should to his relationship with God. From that point on, his faith became the central motivating reality of his life. He spent much more time studying the scriptures and praying, was more faithful at worship, grew in the amount of time and money he gave to his congregation – and through all of this, God changed his life. He continued to be involved in some of the other activities that used to occupy his time and energies, but they began to play a lesser role in his priorities. As his faith became more central, he found himself much stronger, and more capable of handling challenging times.

I've told you these three stories to introduce you to three faithful people. We often tell stories about ourselves when we are getting to know each other. When we come to know what each other has experienced – the joys and the sorrows that have graced our lives, and how we have responded to them – we begin to know, in a much more intimate way, who each other is.

We do that in formal settings. I often have those who attend our New Member classes share their life's story with the group. Many times, at the start of a retreat or a workshop, we will be asked to share a bit about ourselves. Job applications often include questions about our history that intend to let the interviewer know us better.

We do that informally as well. Two mothers sit in a park and talk about the experiences they had giving birth to their children. Two formerly married people share with one another the pain of separation and divorce. Two Pastors describe to one another the joys and sorrows that are a part of the churches they serve. Two friends, struggling to cope with addictions, find support in knowing that the other has been there too.

Who are you? You are the sum of the stories that make up your life. And as you share those stories, we come to know you better, and a deeper relationship between us is given birth.

As you and I come to understand the power in the shared story, we begin to understand why the people of God have always told stories to describe the One in whom they believe.

Today is the day that our church calls "The Holy Trinity." It is a day in which we do some thinking about what the stories we've heard about God have taught us. It is a day when we grapple with the concept that the

one God whom we worship is Father, and is Son, and is Spirit – without being three separate individuals.

It is a tempting day for us preachers. We are tempted to take this word, "Trinity," this word that was created long after the last pages of our Bible were written; we are tempted to take this word and turn it over, inspect it, describe it to you, and ask you to believe in it. And I'd be lying if I tried to claim that the sermons I've preached on this day haven't done that a time or two.

But today I am convinced that the best way to share God with each other is not to discuss theological constructs, but instead, to tell stories. Stories of how our Triune God has entered into our lives, transformed our living, and worked through us to transform the world. Each of us has a story to tell. And each of those stories is witness to the way that God, whom we know as Creator, Savior and Spirit, has blessed us and strengthened us. I look forward to hearing more about your stories in years to come – and to what we can learn, together, about the God who calls us to faithfulness.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (June 7, 2009)

Gospel Lesson; English Text: ⁱ

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. ⁱⁱ

Gospel Lesson; Greek Text:

Ἦν δὲ ἄνθρωπος ἐκ τῶν Φαρισαίων, Νικόδημος ὄνομα αὐτῷ, ἄρχων τῶν Ἰουδαίων· οὗτος ἦλθεν πρὸς αὐτὸν νυκτὸς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· ραββί, οἶδαμεν ὅτι ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἐλήλυθας διδάσκαλος· οὐδεὶς γὰρ δύναται ταῦτα τὰ σημεῖα ποιεῖν ἃ σὺ ποιεῖς, ἐὰν μὴ ἡ ὁ θεὸς μετ' αὐτοῦ. ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι, ἐὰν μὴ τις γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν, οὐ δύναται ἰδεῖν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ. λέγει πρὸς αὐτὸν [ὁ] Νικόδημος· πῶς δύναται ἄνθρωπος γεννηθῆναι γέρον ὧν μὴ δύναται εἰς τὴν κοιλίαν τῆς μητρὸς αὐτοῦ δευτέρου εἰσελθεῖν καὶ γεννηθῆναι; ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς· ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι, ἐὰν μὴ τις γεννηθῆ ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος, οὐ δύναται εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ. τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τῆς σαρκὸς σὰρξ ἐστίν, καὶ τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος πνεῦμα ἐστίν. μὴ θαυμάσης ὅτι εἶπον σοι· δεῖ ὑμᾶς γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν. τὸ πνεῦμα ὅπου θέλει πνεῖ καὶ τὴν φωνὴν αὐτοῦ ἀκούεις, ἀλλ' οὐκ οἶδας πόθεν ἔρχεται καὶ ποῦ ὑπάγει· οὕτως ἐστὶν πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος. ἀπεκρίθη Νικόδημος καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· πῶς δύναται ταῦτα γενέσθαι; ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· σὺ εἶ ὁ

ⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at <http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Worship/Lectionary.aspx>.

ⁱⁱ St. John 3:1-17, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

διδάσκαλος τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ καὶ ταῦτα οὐ γινώσκει· ἀμὴν λέγω σοι ὅτι ὁ οἶδαμεν λαλοῦμεν καὶ ὁ ἐώρακάμεν μαρτυροῦμεν, καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἡμῶν οὐ λαμβάνετε. εἰ τὰ ἐπίγεια εἶπον ὑμῖν καὶ οὐ πιστεύετε, πῶς ἂν εἶπω ὑμῖν τὰ ἐπουράνια πιστεύσετε; καὶ οὐδεὶς ἀναβέβηκεν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν εἰ μὴ ὁ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καταβάς, ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου. Καὶ καθὼς Μωϋσῆς ὕψωσεν τὸν ὄφιν ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ, οὕτως ὕψωθῆναι δεῖ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων ἐν αὐτῷ ἔχη ζωὴν αἰώνιον.

οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον, ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ ἔδωκεν, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλ' ἔχη ζωὴν αἰώνιον. οὐ γὰρ ἀπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν υἱὸν εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἵνα κρίνη τὸν κόσμον, ἀλλ' ἵνα σωθῆ ὁ κόσμος δι' αὐτοῦ. ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱⁱⁱ St. John 3:1-17, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).