

The Trinity: The God who acts

A sermon for the First Sunday after Pentecost

John 3:1-18

Finally a Sunday where we get to talk about God!

From Advent until Pentecost the focus is on the Son, the coming of the Son and all he did. Then with Pentecost until the beginning of Advent again, it's about the Holy Spirit. When do we get to talk about God? Where does God come in?

On Trinity Sunday! We're not talking about God in some abstract way, but about the Trinity. It's important to see how the Trinity works, that we talk about who this God is and what is he like in that particular way.

One of the great names in the Old Testament is Michael, Micah, or Mikaela. They all mean in Hebrew, "who is like God." We tend to turn that around and say: Who is God like? And then we take what we are like and project it on the heavens, and say: God is omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, and so on.

First, we consider God as omnipotent, being all-powerful. In the present day there is a lot of talk about atheism. That's already come and gone. Well-known atheists like Dawkins and Hitchens are really second-rate thinkers, but we are confused by the ideas they raise such as: Could God create everything in one day?

Let's think about how God works. God could create all the geological strata and all the billions of universes astronomers say there are, and all the books in all the libraries, and all the memories you and I have, and all of the histories of all peoples on this earth, and everyone who has existed on this earth, all in one second. Just by saying the word. No matter how big we can think, the Lord is bigger. We want to limit him.

Then we ask: What is this power about? Could God create hills without valleys? Of course he could. We wouldn't be able to see them, but why is that not possible?

We have learned God is eternal, but can God change? There has to be a beginning, a First Cause because things started somewhere. And then we talk about final cause because things are going somewhere. The second law of thermodynamics is: Everything is running down. There are changes, cause and effect. Is God the great cause-maker? Is he the basis for morals, good and evil? Doing right and wrong? Can he change? Is he part of that process?

Can God die? We confess: God died on the cross (God is one.). Suddenly we are faced with the fact that our thinking, which is based on contradiction or paradox, is created itself. It's limited. And God is not limited by our thinking and our saying that he has to be the way we think about him, the way our thinking goes or makes sense.

This is also true about God being all-wise or all-knowing. Does God know the future? If he knows the future, does he determine the future? And if he does, is that fate? What about evil?

He is the one who creates the end before the beginning. He is not limited by time because he creates time. That brings us to the text for today. In John 6:44 it states: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." This idea is repeated in John 6:65: "No one can come to me unless it is granted to him by the Father." The Lord does it. He's not limited by our understanding of logic, space, or time.

Last week, Pentecost, we focused on John 4:24: "God is spirit." Today the text is quite different. John 3:6: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the spirit is spirit." The flesh is different from the spirit and the spirit from the flesh. In fact, the key verse of the Gospel of John is 1:14: "The Word became flesh." We say: "God is spirit." God is also flesh.

You probably also learned in Sunday School the Bible verse: "God is love." That's 1 John 4:8. This verse has to be seen in relation to the text for today. Once again the lectionary committee has cut off a key verse. They give us John 3:1-17 and leave off verse 18. You know John 3:16-17: "God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. Then verse 17: "God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." Then comes verse 18: "He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already." When we say, God is love," there is also God's holiness. That is very much part of the paragraph, but the lectionary cut it off.

We tend to say: We're going to think about God and what God has to be like. In the Eighteenth Century Voltaire said: "Man created God in his own image, and God returned the compliment."

We project our own ideas on God, on what he must be. A century before Voltaire, Pascal said: "The God of the philosophers is not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and

Jacob." We end up in speculation, making up God the way we want, or the way we think he should be.

Luther Seminary Professor, Gerhard Forde, used to tell what would happen every fall about a week after classes started. A few students would come into his office and ask: "We want to transfer out of your course. We want a God who suits our expectations."

We do not want the God who is, but the God of our wishful thinking.

We are helped by Old Testament texts. Deuteronomy 6:4 is a little creed. It reads: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord." or as it is stated in Deuteronomy 4:35: "The Lord is God, there is no other beside him."

The Lord is God. That's what's basic. And the Lord is the Creator, the one who acts. That name, Yahweh, which we learned at the burning bush, can be translated: "He who is," or "He who acts" (Exodus 3:14).

The giving of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:2-3: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other Gods before me." The same is true in the Old Testament credo in Deuteronomy 26:5-10:

"A wandering Aramean was my father and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there we became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the Lord the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey." The God who acts.

Therefore the Lord is Lord and that makes all the difference. He is the Creator, and the Creator is different from First Cause. Remarkably, Scripture says: "He created out of nothing." Impossible for the philosophers. But there it is in Romans 4:17 and Second Maccabees 7:28.

What is the Trinity about? We have the idea it's kind of like new math or impossible thinking, as in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, when Alice says to the White Queen: "I can't believe impossible things." And the White Queen answers:

"Why sometimes I believe six impossible things before breakfast." Or as Tertullian said: "I believe because it's absurd."

For four hundred years the Early Church fought not only battles of the mind but actual wars over how to sort out the Trinity. What it's about is salvation. What did they do?

At the Councils of Nicea (325) and the first Council of Constantinople (381) they established the Nicene Creed: "Jesus is of the same substance, the same being, as the Father." Not "similar" or "like," but "the same." Having made that decision, the Church faced the question: Was he truly human? Then at Council of Ephesus (431) they said: He is "truly human and was born of a mother just like you and me" (Mary, the God-bearer).

Then they asked: How do we relate the two? That he is truly God and truly human? At the Council of Chalcedon in 451, they said: He is "unmixed" and "undivided" and if you are tempted to speculate and solve how that works, just stop. Don't go there. You can't sort it out.

What is the Trinity about? The Trinity is about salvation because he must be truly God to **SAVE** us and he must be truly human to save **US** (Athanasius). That is what we celebrate today. What God is doing is not a matter of speculating about what God could do. No, the hidden God is totally unknown. The revealed God is the God who came, died, and rose again for you and me. And that's what we mean in the famous Bible verse you may also have learned in Sunday School, Hebrews 13:8: "Jesus Christ the same yesterday and today and forever." That's about the Gospel, what God has done. That's unchanging. Amen.