

© John H. Young, 2024. This sermon may be reproduced, in part or in whole, and by any means, for personal use, group study, or similar non-commercial purposes without charge or further permission. Credit should be given for group use. Commercial reproduction and distribution are prohibited except with the written permission of John H. Young.

Bridge Street United Church
May 26, 2024
Readings: Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 29; Romans 8:12-17

Thinking About the Trinity

Today is Trinity Sunday, a Sunday, as you would guess by that title, in which worship leaders are encouraged to focus on the Trinity. It is a Sunday many preachers, I think, approach with some sense of trepidation, perhaps even consider in advance if it might be a good Sunday to be on vacation. Congregational members may have a sense of trepidation about it, too, once they know the projected subject matter. The reasons both preacher and congregation members may feel trepidation are similar and arise from two related concerns felt by both.

First, a sermon focussed around the Trinity can seem quite esoteric. Discussion of it can be eye-glazing. Second, and related to the first, unlike most other things that a preacher might look at—stories of Jesus, for example—a sermon about the Trinity does not, at first blush, seem likely to deal with day-to-day issues, with the practical things or questions many of us think about and hope that a sermon might address.

Having acknowledged the challenge, I think that the Trinity is an important concept and one that can be very meaningful for us. It is a concept that can tell us much about God, about a God who claims us and who loves us. That knowledge can offer us strength, comfort, a sense that we are not alone—knowledge that can support us in both the good times we know and the challenges we inevitably face from time to time, including those challenges that sometimes raise for us the question of the meaningfulness of life itself. So, I want to talk in this sermon about

why I think the Trinity to be a valuable, meaningful concept for us, indeed, a concept that can enhance our day-to-day living.

I want to begin with an observation that might, at first, seem to run counter to what I have just said about the value and helpfulness of the concept of the Trinity. The concept of the Trinity, as we have it, is something that developed primarily in the third and fourth centuries. There are several references in the New Testament to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, to use the traditional terminology of the Trinity. However, the idea of one God experienced as three persons—or in three different, distinct ways, in the fashion later creeds described the Trinity—is not something we find in the Bible.

That said, if the concept of the Trinity got formulated as it did because of questions that arose in the second, third, and fourth centuries of our era, the concept developed because church was endeavouring to respond to those questions on the basis of understandings of God that they found in the Bible. So, while we do not find in Scripture anything like a fully expressed understanding of the Trinity, those later formulations were an effort to try to explain who God was and how God was understood, given the context of those subsequent centuries, but based on ideas about God found in Scripture.

So, it is to some of those Biblical ideas about God that I want to turn, ideas reflected in the traditional understanding of the Trinity that described God as one, but experienced by us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit or, in one of the more recent formulations of the Trinity, one God, experienced by us as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. This later formulation focuses on what each of those persons of the Trinity is understood primarily to do.

In looking at those Biblical ideas of God, I want to talk primarily about the passage Moira read from Isaiah. It is Isaiah's call as a prophet. At first glance, it seems an unusual

passage to use to talk about the Trinity. I know the hymn, “Holy, Holy, Holy,” that was the basis of today’s anthem and whose first and last stanzas Mitchell invited us to join in singing, picks up imagery from Isaiah, chapter 6. But I want to be clear. In this passage from Isaiah, there is certainly no reference to the Trinity as Christians understand that term. After all, this passage comes from a period long before the birth of Christ. But what we do find in Isaiah are ideas about God that are also conveyed in the Christian understanding of the Trinity, and it is those ideas I want to explore in the rest of this sermon.

I mentioned that these opening verses of Isaiah, chapter 6, recount the call of the prophet Isaiah. It begins with the prophet seeing God, or, perhaps, a vision of God. God is pictured as sitting on a throne, the hem of God’s robe filling the temple. Biblical scholars debate whether the “temple” here is the temple in Jerusalem, or whether Isaiah has here a vision of God’s heavenly realm, where God is seated, surrounded by heavenly beings. Regardless of which understanding of “temple” one takes, a key characteristic of God being portrayed here is God’s holiness. This is the God who created the world, and, as the text runs, “the whole earth is full of his glory.”

This is a God worthy of all the praise we can offer, the sense that is picked up in that hymn or, today, anthem, “Holy, Holy, Holy.” It is a theme found strongly in many of the Psalms. Indeed, the developed pattern and practice of Christian worship, our worship, is based on this sense that God is holy, other, worthy of praise. This is the God who created this world out of love.

Look at what happens next in this passage. Isaiah, this prophet to be, is struck by his own unworthiness, indeed, not just his own unworthiness but the unworthiness of all the people of Israel, all those to whom he will soon be sent. They have not been living as God would wish. Indeed, many had abandoned the worship of God for the worship of other gods. In response to

his expression of both his own unworthiness, his own sinfulness, and that of the people, a seraph flies to him with a live coal taken from the altar. The seraph touches Isaiah's lips with this live coal, saying, "Now this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed, and your sin is blotted out." In other words, he is forgiven, his sin, his unworthiness is swept away.

The final act—the soon-to-be prophet hears God's voice asking, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?" And Isaiah says, "Here am I; send me."

In this passage, we have God, through the action of the seraph, forgiving the prophet, sweeping away all his past, and then sending him out with a message to the people of Israel but, indeed, beyond that, to subsequent generations.

In other words, in this story, we see three activities of God reflected. One is the remembrance of God creating the world and all therein, an activity that makes God worthy of praise. Second, we see a God who redeems. Third, we see a God who commissions a prophet to convey a message to the people of Israel and, I would argue, through this Biblical book, to a wider audience. I need to note that the prophet's message in Isaiah is one of impending destruction but then of a subsequent renewal through a faithful remnant.

Now, I want to be clear. What I am describing here in this passage from Isaiah is not the classical Trinitarian formula or expression of one God in three persons. But I would argue that the classical Trinitarian formula or expression is an effort to say things about the Church's experience of God. It is an experience rooted in Scripture and in the living of life. And I think that this passage from Isaiah is an early expression of those same experiences. Granted, we do not have Jesus, as that subsequent expression of God's redeeming love. But we do have in this passage a picture of a God who acts in love, who forgives and redeems, and who sends a messenger whose message is of a God who will redeem and forgive and re-build.

These experiences of God recounted in the call of the prophet Isaiah bear significant resemblance to the experiences of God recounted in the New Testament, namely, God's creation of the world in love, God's action through Jesus to redeem, and God's ongoing activity through the Holy Spirit to lead people to work to help bring about the kingdom of God.

The concept of the Trinity, as it developed in the first few centuries of the Church's existence, was an effort to describe the fulness of God, the fulness of God as that was seen in Scripture. It was an effort to hold together belief in one God with the Biblical witness of God having taken on human flesh and lived amongst us in Jesus and both the Biblical witness and the ongoing experience of the Church that God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit, continued to be present as Jesus had promised it would.

I want to note one other important aspect of the Trinity. When we look at those experiences of God that the concept of the Trinity seeks to capture, what unites them is God's effort to claim us. Cynthia Rigby, a contemporary American theologian, observed in her writing about the Trinity that God is not only with us but God is also for us. She makes the distinction between a person who is with us, accompanies us, wishes the best for us, and a person who is for us, on our side, advocating for us, seeking to help us in challenges and trials we might be facing in our lives, doing whatever it takes to support us. God, she notes, is for us, not just with us but for us. She is the also the person from whom I borrowed the idea that the Trinity is a way to speak about God's effort to claim us. God does not want to claim us in some oppressive way, but to claim us as an act of love, in the way that a lover claims the one who is loved. That claiming us as an act of love is a theme that runs deeply through Paul's letter to the Romans, not least in that portion I read earlier from chapter 8, where Paul speaks about God adopting us, making us children of God. And later, at the very end of chapter 8, Paul makes the point that there is

nothing, absolutely nothing, “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, [that] will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

In 2006, the United Church published a new statement of faith, something we have done about once every generation. Those involved in the initial effort in the early 20th century to develop a statement of faith that would unite three different denominations thought it was something every subsequent generation should do. They judged that there were certain key concepts—eternal verities, they called them—in the Christian faith, but those concepts needed to be expressed anew in the context and language of each generation.

In its opening paragraphs, I think that 2006 statement of faith, called *A Song of Faith*, captures well the concepts that lie at the heart of our understanding of the Trinity. In closing, I want to share that opening of *A Song of Faith*:

“God is Holy Mystery,
beyond complete knowledge,
above perfect description.

Yet,
in love,
the one eternal God seeks relationship.

So God creates the universe
and with it the possibility of being and relating.
God tends the universe,
mending the broken and reconciling the estranged.
God enlivens the universe,
guiding all things toward harmony with their Source.”

And to that God who created this world, to the one through whom we have come to know that God most fully, and to the Holy Spirit, the presence of that God, with us now and with us always, be all honour, glory, and praise, Amen.

Resources

Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor. *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

Brueggemann, Walter. *Isaiah 1-39*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.

Rigby, Cynthia L. *Holding Faith: A Practical Introduction to Christian Doctrine*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018.