

Transcendence and Immanence in God the Holy Trinity

A Sermon preached at the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, Marietta, GA

by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, May 27, 2018

Trinity Sunday (year B): Isaiah 6:1-8; Roman 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

In today's Old Testament reading, the prophet Isaiah shares with us his vision of the throne room of God. The whole vision is other-worldly—Isaiah is completely out of his element. He stands as a fallen, sinful man in the presence of the most majestic and most holy God. Isaiah is overwhelmed! And yet, God calls Isaiah to speak for him, and Isaiah says “Here I am, send me.”

This is a vision of the transcendence of God. Transcendence is that quality of God that is totally different from anything like us. God's transcendence is so completely different from anything in creation that we don't even have the language to describe God. Because God is transcendent, we cannot possibly know God fully or describe God adequately. And yet, we're still curious. We want to know more about God. We want to understand God a little more. Among all the claims about God and gods and spirituality these days, we want to at least try to describe this transcendent God and know what is true about God and what is false.

There is good news for the curious. Not only is God transcendent, but God is also immanent, that is to say, close to us. God came to us in human flesh in Jesus. And yet, we discover that even with God coming as a human being, understanding the nature of God is still complicated. God's self revelation in Jesus and his outpouring of the Holy Spirit leads us to the doctrine of the Trinity: that God is one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God.

On this Trinity Sunday, I want to describe how and why we have this doctrine, and why understanding the nature of God in this way is so important. If you like sermons with concrete illustrations from daily life, I'll ask you to put on your abstract thinking cap today.

The doctrine of the Trinity is a set of claims that we find in our Nicene Creed¹. The doctrine of the Trinity is a formula of language that the church developed to accurately describe what we know to be true about God. God's self-revelation in Jesus came first; the language to describe that revelation developed as we tried to explain Jesus and as we tried to explain the Holy Spirit.

First, we start with an important and unique claim central to God's people from the beginning. God tells Moses and the people of Israel “Hear, O Israel, the LORD your God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”² God revealed himself to the world through Israel as entirely different from the pagan gods of nature or the polytheistic gods of Egypt, Greece and Rome. Jesus and the Christian faith have always affirmed the oneness of God as an essential way of describing the nature of God.

We also get hints in the Old Testament of how God works. He speaks the Word and creation comes into being. The Spirit broods over the waters of chaos in creation, speaks through the prophets and brings dry bones to life. Then God came to us in Jesus. Jesus calls God his Father,

¹ And robustly described in the “Athanasian” Creed found on page 864 in the Book of Common Prayer.

² Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

he told us he is one with the Father. Jesus was worshipped, he forgave sins, he healed and gave new life—all things that only God can do. This was the Good News—that the transcendent God came to us in human flesh. He came to us to defeat sin and death—to die as a sacrifice for our sins that divide us from God, and to rise again to new life that we might have life. And he sent God the Holy Spirit to be with us to empower us for this new life.

This is what God did in revealing himself to us. This is what we discovered is true about God. But soon, as people tried to explain all this, they ran into problems. They were trying to be helpful in explaining things, but their explanations often made claims that went against what we know about God. Early on, there were some who said that though Jesus appeared to be human, he wasn't really human. They said he wasn't born, he didn't suffer or actually die.³ But these claims (which preserved God's one-ness) contradicted what we already knew about Jesus. Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried and descended to the dead. Do you recognize that language? We find that in the Apostles' Creed and in a similar form in the Nicene Creed. That language is there to clarify that Jesus is indeed fully human.

Roughly 200 years later, someone else tried to explain how Jesus is divine and yet how God is one. Arius claimed that Jesus is not one with God, but rather a divine creature—the first thing created by God—but not one with God. However, this also contradicts what we know about Jesus. He is the Word who in the beginning was with God and the Word that was God and the Word through whom all things were made.⁴ He is one with the Father, not a creature of the Father. So the church clarified that Jesus is one substance with the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God. We find this language in the Nicene Creed, clarifying that Jesus is fully God.

At the same time, the church clarified the place of the Holy Spirit as well. Jesus prayed to the Father to send the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit spoke and acted in the lives of the church while Jesus was absent from them, having ascended into heaven. The church clarified that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are not just metaphors, but essential to understanding the nature of God. In fact, if you get this part about God wrong, you start to worship a false god, and you lose the message of salvation that is so central to the Christian Good News.

This is the doctrine of the Trinity: God is one God in three “persons.” “Persons” is the word that the church used to describe the way the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit relate to one another. There are not three gods, but rather one God. The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God. They are each unique and each fully God, and yet they are not separate from the other, not three gods, but one in substance.

If this doesn't make complete sense, remember that we are trying to describe something completely beyond creation. And we are trying to put into words what we know to be true about God based on God's self-revelation. We are not trying to invent an easy-to-understand religion.

³ These are known as the Gnostics, whose beliefs differed from the faith in many other ways as well. “Docetism” is the particular heresy that said that Jesus only appeared to be human.

⁴ John 1:1-3.

Perhaps the hardest part to understand about the Trinity is how God can be three and one at the same time. Here is where we try to come up with concrete illustrations, using metaphors from our world, places in the conceptual and material world that demonstrate this kind of paradox. Each metaphor can be helpful, however nothing is quite like God, so each metaphor also has flaws.

For instance, St. Patrick used the shamrock to teach about the Trinity. The shamrock has three leaves, but it is one shamrock—three and one. This helps, but each of the three leaves is the same, and the three are really just parts of the whole. God is not quite like that—not three thirds, but three wholes, and yet only one God.

How about a baseball? The ball has a core that we can't see. The ball has an interlocking leather cover that we can see and feel. The ball has laces that hold it all together. But you can take the pieces apart, and none of them is the whole baseball. Each divine person is not a separate part, like three gods that work together. Each divine person is fully God.

So how about another metaphor—how about water? Water can be liquid water, solid ice, or gaseous water vapor. All three are water, yet unique. This metaphor helps, doesn't it? Yet this metaphor also breaks down. This suggests that God shifted into Jesus at one time, then the Spirit at another time, then back to the Father, rather than having all three persons simultaneously integral to the nature of God. This problem is a heresy called modalism—the idea that God operates in one mode at a time.⁵ The divine persons aren't simply modes of operation, their nature is part of God's nature.

How about another metaphor—how about the human soul? St. Augustine used a psychological model of the human person: the mind, our intellect (or self-knowledge) and our will. One self, three distinct and interrelated persons: mind, intellect and will. Three and yet one, one and yet three. This gets close, yet the divine persons are more than attributes of God.

All this theological work can get bewildering after a while. At some point, we might be tempted to throw up our hands and say “O come on, what difference does the doctrine of the Trinity make anyway?” But the doctrine of the Trinity makes a tremendous difference. If we only speak of God's oneness, then Jesus becomes extraneous—an example for living, but not one who saves us from our sins. The Holy Spirit becomes a metaphor for God, and not God who is close to us, active and miraculous in our lives.

Most of all, the doctrine of the Trinity reflects the truth of God. The truth may not be easy to understand or popular, but unlike what we see on Facebook and in the press, popularity does not always define what is true. The doctrine of the Trinity gives us clarity that Jesus really is God's self-revelation, and the Holy Spirit really is God at work in us and through us. That assurance also means that Jesus really does forgive us and does bring us to the Father. We really can be alive in the Spirit—not just as a sentimental metaphor, but as the truth.

⁵ This is one of the problems of referring to God as “Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier” rather than “Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

The doctrine of the Trinity is important to the Christian faith and life. But remember that, though the doctrine tries to describe the Trinity, the doctrine is not the Trinity himself. Doctrine points to the reality of God who is beyond our understanding, yet who loves us and knows us better than we know ourselves.

So seek God. Seek to understand the depths of who God is. Read the countless books written by theologians trying to describe the nature of God. But more importantly, in prayer and worship, come to know and be known by this mysterious God whether or not you fully understand him. Married couples do not fully understand each other, but they do know the love that they share. Likewise, as you seek God with your mind, love God with your heart. Enter into that close relationship with God, and you will experience both the immanence and transcendence of God and be blessed.

In the name of one God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*