

THE HOLY TRINITY

May 30, 2021

A "Word Out" audio transcript



Prelude

Come, Join the Dance of Trinity
Terry D. Wilson (pub. 2018)

Welcome

P: Welcome, this Holy Trinity Sunday to Queen Anne Lutheran Church. Wherever you are listening, whatever challenges you might be facing, we invite you into this space: one where you can hear the good news through proclamation, spoken and sung; a time where you can be still, and know God is God.

When we say God is the Triune God, we are saying something about what God is beyond, before, and after the universe: namely, Love. Love, of course, presupposes community. This community within God, or rather, which *is* God, offers a blueprint for the kind of community we are called to foster in the church, and beyond the church in the world. But how do we convey our understanding of such love without falling into logical absurdities about God as both one and three simultaneously? In today's message we will find out.

Confession and Forgiveness

P: Blessed be the Holy Trinity, one God,
the God of manna, the God of miracles, the God of mercy.

G: Amen.

P: Drawn to Christ and seeking God's abundance, let us confess our sin.

Silence for reflection and self-examination.

G: God our provider, help us.

It is hard to believe there is enough to share.

We question your ways

when they differ from the ways of the world in which we live.

We turn to our own understanding rather than trusting in you.

We take offense at your teachings and your ways.

Turn us again to you.

Where else *can* we turn?

Share with us the words of eternal life,

and feed us for life in the world.

Amen.

P: Beloved people of God,

in Jesus, ✠ the manna from heaven, you are fed and nourished.

By Jesus, the worker of miracles, there is always more than enough.

Through Jesus, the bread of life, you are shown God's mercy.

You are forgiven, and loved into abundant life.

G: Amen.


Greeting


P: The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

G: And also with you.

Gospel Acclamation


Isaiah 6:3


G: 
Al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia.


Al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia.

A: 
Repeat alleluia

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; God's glory fills the whole earth.

G: 
Al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia.


Al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia.

The Holy Gospel:

John 3:1-17

A: The Holy Gospel according to John, the third chapter.

G: Glory to you, O Lord.

A: ¹Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He 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." ³Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ⁴Nicodemus 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?" ⁵Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸The 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." ⁹Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹"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. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just 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, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷"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."

P: The Gospel of the Lord.

G: Praise to you, O Christ.

Sermon

Teaching Nicodemus the Trinity
Pastor Dan Peterson

We know the story. Nicodemus, a Pharisee, comes to Jesus by night. We assume perhaps that he travels in the dark to keep his fellow Pharisees in the dark, that is, to keep his meeting with Jesus a secret.

Yet as the story unfolds, we discover something about Nicodemus. It's not just that the other Pharisees are in the dark concerning his whereabouts. *He* is in the dark. Jesus uses the metaphor of being "born from above" to educate him, to teach him the need for spiritual transformation, to help him see reality in a new way, to facilitate his entrance into the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus, however, doesn't get it.

We know Nicodemus misses the point when we get to John 3:4. "How can anyone be born after having grown old?" he asks Jesus, who obviously didn't mean to be taken literally. "Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Nicodemus' misunderstanding does nothing to deter Jesus, who elaborates by speaking of the need to "be born of water and the spirit" (3:5). Water, of course, refers here to the renewing waters of baptism, to the water that gives life. Spirit refers to God, whose activity within and among us opens our hearts and enables them, as Paul says in Philippians 2:3, "to will and work for [God's] good pleasure."

Yet Nicodemus still doesn't grasp the teaching, to the point where Jesus chides him for it. "Are you a teacher of Israel," he asks, "and yet you do not understand these things?" (John 3:10).

Fortunately, we know that Nicodemus isn't totally lost. John mentions him on two more occasions. The first, John 7: 50, has Nicodemus ask the Pharisees – who insist on condemning Jesus and arresting him without a trial – to hear his teachings first and *then* determine whether they are in accordance with Jewish law.

After Jesus dies some 12 chapters later, Nicodemus appears once more. The Gospel tells us that he "who had first come to Jesus by night" had joined Joseph of Arimathea in laying to rest Jesus' body after his crucifixion (19:39). This happens in broad daylight. The narrator's reference to night reminds us of where Nicodemus was symbolically when he first encountered Jesus and his teachings back in chapter three. He was in the dark, whereas now – to cite an old Duke Ellington tune – "he's beginning to see the light."

I like that Nicodemus doesn't begin to see the light at least until chapter seven, if not chapter 19. The story of his gradual transformation raises a serious question: what if "being born from above" constitutes a *process* rather than a single moment in our lives, one where Christ, as Martin

Luther says, “daily drives out the old Adam more and more in accordance with the extent to which faith and knowledge of Christ grow” (*Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 2ed., p. 136)? If this is the case, I find the story of Nicodemus very encouraging!

Instead of reducing the story of our salvation to a single moment in our lives where we “accept Jesus” or “decide for Christ,” the story of Nicodemus reminds us to take the “long view” when it comes to our spiritual journey. It reminds us to trust that whenever we stumble and fall, whenever we live solely for ourselves instead for others and for the common good (see 1 Corinthians 12:7), God picks us up, brushes us off, and inspires us to try again. Becoming a person for others, in turn, becomes the *call of a lifetime*, one that begins in baptism, as Luther says, “makes progress, and is finally perfected at the end through death” (*ibid*).

This is quite an inference from the Nicodemus story! Yet why, I now find myself wondering, would the editors of our lectionary choose John 3:1-17 for Holy Trinity Sunday? What could Nicodemus and the mandate to be “born from above” have to do with our belief in the triune God?

This Is a Special Day

Over the church year we have a variety of special Sundays we call festival days. Generally, these mark a significant event in the life of Jesus, like Epiphany when the three wise men come to visit him, or in the life of the church, as in the story of Pentecost. Holy Trinity Sunday, however, is different. Today we celebrate the only festival day on the Christian calendar dedicated to a doctrine of the church! The editors of the lectionary must have chosen John 3:1-17, our Gospel reading, because it lends itself to the later church teaching – immortalized in the creeds – that God, though one, exists somehow in three persons.

Several weeks ago, I mentioned how it took time for the Bible to be formed as we know it now. It didn’t fall leather-bound from the sky. The church had to gather, edit, and agree upon which writings to include in its sacred collection of texts about Jesus. The same was true for doctrine. It took time

to develop. The Apostles' and Nicene Creeds refer, of course, to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; yet they utilize language and conceptuality that would have been foreign to the authors of the New Testament who were living several hundred years prior in the first century.

What you will find in the New Testament, however, is something curious when it comes to its theology. John 3:1-17 exemplifies it. When the narrator mentions God (vv. 2-4, 16-17), he also refers to the Son of God (vv. 16-17) as well as to the Spirit of God (vv. 5-6, 8). This would explain why the editors of the lectionary chose this reading for today. It provides the key ingredients that theologians and church councils would subsequently use to develop the doctrine of the Trinity.

Teaching the Trinity

Discussing the origins of trinitarian language, of course, differs from teaching the doctrine itself! Most people (including pastors) shy away from it and with good reason. For one thing, we must contend with the ostensible absurdity that God can be three and one simultaneously. For another, we find ourselves centuries removed from the context and concerns that originally gave rise to this view of God. We lack awareness, for example, that the early Church vigorously defended the divinity of Christ, referring to him in the Nicene Creed as "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God," because it realized that, were Jesus *merely* human, he would need to be saved from death just like we do.

The savior, in other words, would need a savior. In a world where death was a constant threat, where life was nasty, brutish, and often short, the church recognized that Jesus could hardly be the savior it proclaimed if he, too, needed to be liberated from the tyranny of death.

But what about the contradiction that arises when the church and its creeds claim that God can be three and one simultaneously? How do we make sense of that, apart from dismissing it as a problem for mathematicians? Surely, we can understand the various reasons for *why*

the church formulated the doctrine of the Trinity, or *how* it drew upon the writings of the New Testament along the way. We could even talk about how our understanding of the Trinity stems from the three ways in which God has revealed Godself to us over the course of salvation history as creator of the world, redeemer of humankind, and sustainer of the cosmos. Yet the pesky problem of how God intrinsically remains three-in-one remains an issue.

How do we resolve it?

I have to say, I never thought of this before, but what would Jesus do? Maybe we should start there. How would he teach someone like Nicodemus about the fundamental nature of God from what would later become the Christian point of view?

(For this exercise, I am assuming Jesus is aware of the future, including what's written about him just to make a point.)

Surely, Jesus would avoid speaking abstractly about God, the way the Greeks did. He was a Jew. Beyond that, he was an itinerant preacher who used imagery from everyday life to convey truths about the spiritual dimension of life. He talked about the tiny mustard seed, for example, comparing what emerges from it to the kingdom of God. He spoke in parables. He drew analogies and made comparisons.

We can do what Jesus might do too, albeit with a caveat. If the goal is to convey the teaching that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share the same essence or being, then some analogies will be more adequate than others. Consider the egg. It possesses three distinguishable parts: the shell, the yolk, and the white. These parts, however, are not the same in being. The shell is solid, whereas the yolk and white are liquid. The three are not one, except as parts of a greater whole.

"Wait!" I can imagine Nicodemus saying to Jesus. "I'm confused."

Perhaps a theologian would interrupt, saying that we must remember to affirm the oneness of God in being, which the Father, Son, and Spirit, though distinct, nevertheless share.

Hm. I suspect Jesus would reply differently. He'd offer another analogy, one that would come from common experience. Perhaps he would appeal to the ear, as Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, did some 1,500 years later. Ignatius loved music. He compared the Trinity to a chord of three notes on a piano. The sound is one, he noticed, even though the notes by themselves remained separate and distinct.

The insight was so powerful to Ignatius that it brought him to tears. It conveyed to him how God could be one and threefold simultaneously.

If Nicodemus scratched his head, perhaps as a few of you are doing now, Jesus would hopefully offer another example. Maybe he would compare Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to three scoops of vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry ice cream. The flavors differ, to be sure, but the essence of them all remains the same.

If neither an appeal to sound nor an appeal to taste worked, Jesus might try a comparison from the world of sight. He could quote a Christian mystic who writes centuries later, "Let me resort here to examples from what we perceive and from what is familiar. In a house the light from all lamps is completely interpenetrating, yet each is clearly distinct. There is distinction in unity and there is unity in distinction" (*The Complete Works of Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 61).

Any one of these comparisons might give rise to immediate illumination on the part of Nicodemus, the kind we know as an "a-ha" moment. It's hard to say. After all, "the wind [or Spirit] blows where it chooses," as Jesus remarks in today's reading (John 3:8). If nothing clicks for you listening, just remember – as was the case with Nicodemus' spiritual transformation – *these things take time*. Perhaps during next year's Holy Trinity Sunday, something will click.

Addendum

It's hard to speak of the Trinity without trivializing it, especially when we compare it to something like ice cream. I like the idea, however, of using images and analogies as a starting point. Perhaps this approach would be

suitable accordingly for someone like Nicodemus at the beginning of his spiritual journey, one where he is still “in the dark” as opposed to where we find him in chapter 19.

Were Jesus to start with Nicodemus in chapter 19, now that Nicodemus had acquired some spiritual maturity and understanding, I wonder how his talk of the Trinity might change. Perhaps he would stress to Nicodemus that the comparisons he used earlier were meant to be poetic and suggestive, to evoke an awareness of the divine in the world, and at the heart of the world, without reducing “it” to an object of the world.

Second, he might convey to Nicodemus something the theologian Karl Barth would say twenty centuries later, namely, that doing theology is “like trying to follow a bird in flight with your eye. The living God is always on the move” (Peter Bolt, “Theological Education”). Images for the Trinity, by contrast, are static. That constitutes their limitation.

Third and finally, Jesus might remind us that the Trinity is ultimately not some abstract metaphysical doctrine, but the Christian way of saying “God is love” (1 John 4:8). Love, after all, presupposes relationship, which as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit lies at the heart of everything.

It’s hard to stop here. If God, I wonder, resides at the heart of everything as a network of relationships, how is that different than when scientists speak of the interconnection between, say, photons and electrons at the quantum level? If God, moreover, is love, then is it proper to think of the universe as the story of God’s love for the world? If so, might the Trinity as it exists “before time” be a rehearsal of such love, one that plays itself out in the grand sweep of cosmic history?

Perhaps these thoughts, too, must wait until next year’s Holy Trinity Sunday.

In the meantime, then, may God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit bless you and keep you all.

Amen.

Hymn of the Day

Come, Join the Dance of Trinity

ELW 412



1 Come, join the dance of Trin - i - ty, be - fore all worlds be - gun—
2 Come, see the face of Trin - i - ty, new - born in Beth - le - hem;
3 Come, speak a - loud of Trin - i - ty, as wind and tongues of flame
4 With - in the dance of Trin - i - ty, be - fore all worlds be - gun,



the in - ter - weav - ing of the Three, the Fa - ther, Spir - it, Son.
then blood - ied by a crown of thorns out - side Je - ru - sa - lem.
set peo - ple free at Pen - te - cost to tell the Sav - ior's name.
we sing the prais - es of the Three, the Fa - ther, Spir - it, Son.



The u - ni - verse of space and time did not a - rise by chance,
The dance of Trin - i - ty is meant for hu - man flesh and bone;
We know the yoke of sin and death, our necks have worn it smooth;
Let voic - es rise and in - ter - weave, by love and hope set free,



but as the Three, in love and hope, made room with - in their dance.
when fear con - fines the dance in death, God rolls a - way the stone.
go tell the world of weight and woe that we are free to move!
to shape in song this joy, this life: the dance of Trin - i - ty.

Text: Richard Leach, b. 1953

Music: KINGSFOLD, English folk tune

Text © 2001 Selah Publishing Co., Inc. www.selahpub.com. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Nicene Creed

**☩: We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.**

**For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary
and became truly human.**

**For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.**

**On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the scriptures;
he ascended into heaven**

and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

**He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.**

**We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,*
who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.**

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

**We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.**

Prayers of the Church

A: Let us come before the triune God in prayer.

A brief silence.

A: We pray, O God, for your holy church around the world. Revitalize and renew us, that we may be reborn once again through the waters of baptism and blowing wind of your Spirit. Lord, in your mercy,

G: **hear our prayer.**

A: We give you thanks for your power revealed to us in creation; for cedar and oak trees, for rushing water, for the echoes of thunder. Lord, in your mercy,

G: **hear our prayer.**

A: We pray for the nations and our leaders, that led by your Spirit, they work towards a world where all of your children enjoy peace. Lord, in your mercy,

G: **hear our prayer.**

A: We pray for healing for all those who suffer, especially victims and survivors of trauma or violence. Give respite to those living with PTSD or any other mental health concerns. Lord, in your mercy,

G: **hear our prayer.**

A: We pray for this worshiping community, that the splendor of your majesty and the holiness of your mystery may be glorified through our worship and our relationships with one another. Lord, in your mercy,

G: **hear our prayer.**

A: For whom or what else do the people of God pray?

A silence is given so that your prayers may be offered.

A: Lord, in your mercy,

G: **hear our prayer.**

A: We give you thanks, O God, for those who have died in the faith. We remember also those whose lives have been lost due to the horrors of war.
Lord, in your mercy,

C: **hear our prayer.**

A: We lift our prayers to you, O God, trusting in your abiding grace.

C: **Amen.**

Lord's Prayer

P: Lord, remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray.

C: **Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.**

**Give us today our daily bread
and forgive us our sins**

as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.

**For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours,
now and forever.**

Amen.

Announcements

P: We thank you for joining us for this service. If you would like to hear other services or access the newest edition of *the Quill*, our newsletter, we invite you to go to our website at queenannelutheran.org.

Benediction

A: Let us bless the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

P: Almighty God, the Father, † the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
bless and preserve you.

C: **Amen.**

Dismissal

P: Go in peace. Serve the Lord.

G: Thanks be to God.

Postlude

From *Triptych on Holy, Holy, Holy*
“... our song shall rise to Thee.”
Jeffrey Blersch (b. 1967)

About today's music

Today's prelude and postlude both come from contemporary composers and evoke the text of today's hymn, “Come, Join the Dance of Trinity” (ELW 412). The hymn's author, Richard Leach, notes that “Dancing has a very long association with the Trinity, going back to eighth-century theologians who used the word perichoresis to speak of the interdependence of unity and Trinity. ‘Dance around’ is a literal translation of the word, but its sense is ‘interweaving,’ and I use that in the hymn.” The prelude is especially dancelike at times, almost like an exercise for a ballet rehearsal – it's significant that the composer, Terry D. Wilson, specifically titled the piece for today's hymn (the same tune is also used with other texts in ELW). The postlude, by Lutheran organist Jeffrey Blersch, alternates grand fanfares with playfully dancelike sections, hinting at the melody of “Holy, Holy, Holy” (ELW 413; the hymn's text echoes today's Gospel acclamation from Isaiah 6). – Cantor Kyle



Queen Anne

LUTHERAN CHURCH

Called to Proclaim God's Love in Christ for Every Person

2400 Eighth Avenue West • Seattle, Washington 98119

Mailing: P.O. Box 17029 • Seattle, WA 98127

206.284.1960 • www.queenannelutheran.org

✠ *Staff* ✠

Pastor	The Rev. Dr. Dan Peterson
Cantor	Kyle Haugen
Children's Ministry Coordinator	Terry Anderson
Parish Administrator	Barbara Bash
Sexton	John Bryant

✠ *In Worship Today* ✠

Pastor	The Rev. Dr. Dan Peterson
Cantor	Kyle Haugen
Lector and Intercessor	Jean Oplinger

This service of worship can also be listened to online on our website.

Go to queenannelutheran.org and click on "WORD OUT" to find audio, video, and print resources for worship at home, as well as resources to use with children.

Visit our YouTube channel for other worship services, educational forums, music and messages for children, and other organ music.