

“Breathing in the Spirit”
Isaiah 6:1-8
Trinity Sunday, May 31, 2015
W. Glenn Doak, Preaching

Today is Trinity Sunday. A friend asked me what I was preaching about this Sunday? I said, “The Trinity.” He said, “Good luck!” There is mystery involved in trying to understand the idea of “one in three” or “three in one.” The mystery of “how can this be?” Many of us struggle with how to keep the mystery alive in talking about God in three persons. If you aren’t careful you can trivialize it. For example some have suggested it is just like a person who has three different identities: a woman who is a mother, an aunt and a sister. All three of those identities are correct but does it help us understand God as Creator, Redeemer and Advocate; as Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

We sing about it like with our opening hymn this morning, “Holy, holy, holy Lord God almighty ... God in three persons, blessed Trinity.” When I baptized Brady a few minutes ago I used the Trinitarian formulae: “I baptize you Brady in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” When we recite the Apostles’ Creed we say “We believe in God the Father ... and in Jesus Christ his Son our Lord ... and I in the Holy Ghost.” It says “Ghost” in the creed but it means the same as the Holy Spirit.

We don’t have any trouble singing, hearing, saying these things about the Trinity but what do they mean to us when we say them? Are we reciting a formulae that we hope someday will be expressed more fully for us to understand? Are we reciting a formulae that in and of itself has a meaning that we don’t comprehend but is pleasing to our ear and we hope to the ear of God? Now I know a little bit about “mystery” with words. My education experiences modeled a bit of mystery. I went to a public high school named Trinity High. It was not a religious school but many outside of the town where it was located thought it must be. My elementary school was named Laboratory not because it was a laboratory school or an experimental school but because it was named for the small community in which it was located Laboratory, PA and I went to Sterling College that had nothing to do with sterling silver or making fine utensils. Though in its early days the college had only three buildings on main street, so as an amusement for people driving through town they would say, “there is Sterling College, in that building they make the knives, there the forks and there the spoons!”

That does bring us back to the Trinity. It is too important a doctrine of the church to dismiss it as either too hard to understand or to say “I’ll never figure it out so let’s leave it to someone else.” We need to more fully understand it to guard against misinterpretation as to who God is, what God is like, where God is at work in the world, or what God thinks about human beings.

I am not under any illusions I am going to bring all of us to a clearer understanding of the Trinity with one sermon on Trinity Sunday in 2015. I do hope that our time this morning might move us along a little bit in our understanding of what the Trinity is about.

Shirley Guthrie in his classic book Christian Doctrine says of the Trinity:

“The same God who is God *over us* as God the Father and Creator,
and God *with and for us* as the incarnate Word and Son,
is also God *in and among us* as God the Holy Spirit.”

If you have any trouble keeping up with this sermon you might begin counting how many times I mention the holy number three as in the three parts of the Trinity. There will be a prize for the correct answer.

The concept of the Trinity has gotten Christian scholars in trouble during interfaith dialogues with the other two monotheistic religions, Judaism and Islam. They say, “We are monotheist and you are not. We believe in one God and you believe in three.” Christians argue, “No, we only have one God, expressed in three persons.” Sometimes they listen and sometimes they don’t.

The Old Testament is clear that the Jews believed in one God. The Shema or the Jewish Apostles’ Creed states, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord.” (Deut. 6:4) That was their confession of faith that they said every day when they prayed. It was a creed they repeated in a time when most of the world believed in many gods. Remember when Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment he did not hesitate in his answers: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart...” (Mark 12:29ff)

Who is this one true God? The first Christians couldn’t talk about God without also talking about a man named Jesus. They didn’t speak of Jesus deity or divinity. What they did speak of is what Jesus did. They did say that Jesus acted like God. When he talked the things he said made sense to them and he said them with absolute authority. He was able to heal the sick, raise the dead with God’s life giving power and he forgave their sins something that only God previously had the right to do. He claimed that when he spoke that he and God were one and when one saw this man Jesus they also saw God. But Jesus made it clear that he was sent from God. God did the sending and Jesus came in obedience. Jesus also made it clear that he came to do the perfect will of the God who had sent him. He did not come to do Jesus’ will but the Father’s will who had sent him. It led some to believe that we had two gods. One up in heaven reigning over heavenly things and one who appeared down here on earth or one God of law/order and one God of love.

Just as early Christians couldn't talk about God the Father, without mentioning Jesus they couldn't talk about God without talking about the Holy Spirit. On the one hand the spirit is the spirit of God that brooded over the waters of creation or the spirit that took Elijah up in a whirlwind to heaven. But the spirit is also the spirit of Jesus. In John 14 Jesus tells the disciples he is going to send another one to be with them, the Advocate. In another place he calls the helper the "spirit of truth." Is this Holy Spirit the spirit of God or the spirit of Jesus or is the spirit an entirely different entity that speaks its own language and is its own entity?

And what about the works of God and the works of the Trinity are they all the works of God or separate works of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit? The work of creation is thought by many to be the exclusive work of the Father. "In the beginning God" so opens the book of Genesis. But the gospel of John tells us that the Word was with God at creation and "all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." It also says the spirit of God was present at creation and enabled things to happen. Thus all three aspects of God were there at creation.

The work of reconciliation and redemption is often thought one of the works of the Son. But Paul reminds us "that in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself. And that it is in the Spirit that we have access to the Father. Thus all three aspects of God are involved in the work of redemption and reconciliation.

The Spirit's work of renewal gets us ready for fellowship with God, and thankful service to God and neighbor is thought of as work not only of the Spirit but also of the Father and the Son. We can attribute different works with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit but we can't separate them. They are different aspects of the total work of one God. The goals and purposes of one are the same as the goals and purposes of the other two.

This kind of thinking led the ancient church to come up with a rule about the work of the Trinity. Stated simply it is, "The works of the Trinity are indivisible," not capable of being divided into parts.

Let me bring you back to Isaiah for a moment and the passage we read from the 6th chapter. It is one of the classic chapters of the Bible. It tells us three things about God. God comes to us in a historical context, God comes to us in worship and speaks to us at times in worship, and God calls us into individual service to God. God came to his people in a historical situation there in Isaiah 6. Something terrible had happened in the life of the people. Isaiah was sad and troubled. King Uzziah had died, he had reigned for fifty-two years mostly as a great king. The whole nation grieved when he died. The king died in 741 B. C. It is an historical fact. Secular literature mentions the death of Uzziah.

In the year that the king died God came to young Isaiah in a worship service in the temple. Isaiah said, "I saw the Lord, high and lifted up. His train filled the entire universe." If you thought the king was great, Wow! What a God! The hem of his robe filled the whole temple. The seraphim and cherubim were there, calling praises to the Lord and covering their eyes. It was an awe filled moment. They were singing "holy, holy, holy, great is the majesty of God." Three holies ... leads some to think of the Trinity right there in the Old Testament. The awesomeness of the moment and the three "holies" sung by the seraphim.

Isaiah said, "Woe is me. I am a man of unclean lips," matched against the holiness of God. When God comes to us we confess our sins just like we do almost every Sunday. We confess our unworthiness and God forgives us. One of the seraphim brought a "hot" coal from the altar of God and touched Isaiah's lips. He cleansed his lips. Aren't you glad we don't do it that way today? Then he heard the voice of God, almost as if there was a heavenly council going on. Where normally God would choose to send an angel to accomplish his tasks, like when he sent Gabriel to talk with Mary and Joseph, this time he asks, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"

God calls us to service. Notice the "who will go for us" in the call to Isaiah, who is the "for us?" Some call this the plural of majesties, when kings or gods speak they speak in plural but the Hebrew suggests otherwise. Is God the father speaking of the Son and the Holy Spirit?

Isaiah says instantly, "Here am I, send me." This passage ends with Isaiah offering his life as service to God. He is answering the call of God to go into the world and serve. The vision is beginning to fade, God is closing the door between earth and heaven and Isaiah begins to recover and realizing what had happened asks, "For how long, God?" The Lord said, "For as long as you have breath here on this earth." For as long as you have breath, you are breathing in the spirit of God and now you breathe it in for a life time. You are my prophet for as long as you have breath, Isaiah. And he was a prophet for a lifetime. This passage brings us the mystery of God the Father and suggests the Son and Holy Spirit are there in the throne room of God.

One more attempt to give us a picture of the Trinity. In Florence, Italy I know that many of you have been there, Ginny and I were there in 2011 during my sabbatical. In Florence in the church of Santa Maria Novella there is a fresco commissioned by the Lenzi family called the *Holy Trinity*. At the foot of the fresco are two female members of the Lenze family kneeling in prayer. Up one level from them are Mary the mother of Jesus and the Beloved Disciple standing at the foot of the cross with Jesus' out stretched arms on the cross. Above the cross is a depiction of God supporting the arms of the crucified Son. Between the beard of God and the head of Jesus is the white, dove-like form of the Holy Spirit. The artist is associating the "throne of Grace" with a crucifixion scene as a way of stating the mystery of the Trinity. Here all three aspects of God are revealed in this suffering moment when God does not turn his back on his Son but is here as a loving father, who in the mystery of the Trinity is one with the Son and the Holy Spirit and suffers on our behalf. (Picture depicted in *Christian Century*, May 27, 2015 inside back cover)