

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

May 26, 2024

Ineffable

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Holy Trinity Sunday, one of the most popular Sundays to preach amongst pastors. Not. This is the only Sunday of the church year dedicated to a church doctrine as opposed to an event in Scripture. One of the only Sundays of the year when you are likely to encounter words like modalism, Arianism, adoptionism, and other “-isms.” You’re also quite likely to hear one of the old chestnut descriptions of the Trinity...analogies like water as solid, liquid, and gas; or the three-leaf clover example. Grappling with the Trinity is hard. Seeking to understand God’s nature is nigh impossible for us.

The mystics had this experience. Time and again they describe their encounters with God using similar, transcendent, language. Some examples:

“Divinity is in its omniscience and omnipotence like a wheel, a circle, a whole, that can neither be understood, nor divided, nor begun nor ended. - Hildegard of Bingen

“We see God not only through knowledge but also through ignorance. Although there is spiritual comprehension of him, understanding, knowledge, contact, sense perception, opinion, concept, naming and so on, nevertheless he is neither comprehended, nor explained, nor named. He is nothing existing, but he is also seen in anything existing.” - Dionysius the Areopagite

“I see without eyes, and I hear without ears. I feel without feeling and taste without tasting. I know neither form nor measure; for without seeing I yet behold an operation so divine that the words I first used, perfection, purity, and the like, seem to me now mere lies in the presence of truth. . . . Nor can I any longer say, “My God, my all.” Everything is mine, for all that is God’s seem to be wholly mine. I am mute and lost in God...God so transforms the soul in Him that it knows nothing other than God; and He continues to draw it up into His fiery love until He restores it to that pure state from which it first issued.” – St. Catherine of Genoa

“Divine light is so overwhelming that the soul is unable to bear it unless it is tempered in the angel's light and so conveyed into the soul.” – Meister Eckhart

"If you have understood, then what you have understood is not God." - St. Augustine

All the mystics, and others who had powerful experiences of encounters with the divine, struggled to recount those encounters, struggled even to describe the Divine. Common themes in their attempts include things like: unspeakable joy, overwhelming light, utter darkness, fire, spirit, presence, pain, wholeness, nothingness, and plenty more. All of these deeply faithful people struggled to express the Godhead. God is ineffable...impossible to describe. At best we can hint at God's glory and magnitude.

I think this is the best place for us to start when considering the Trinity, or any aspect of God. We are too limited to truly know or even fully experience God. Our senses, our intellect, our very souls, are overwhelmed by God's holiness. From this starting point, acknowledging our limitations, we can explore what the Word has to say about God's nature.

God is always greater than we can imagine. Just the hem of God's robe fills the Temple,¹ the largest building the Israelites would have known. God's voice is louder than thunder, making nations skip and wildernesses shake.² “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts,”³ God tells Job.

Encountering God is a dangerous proposition. We would do well to remember the advice Mr. Beaver gives Susan in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, “‘Aslan is a lion- the Lion, the great Lion.’ ‘Ooh’ said Susan. ‘I'd thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion’...‘Safe?’ said Mr Beaver ...‘Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you.’” We cannot expect God to bend to our will or to follow our advice. God is not tame; God is not under our control. Exodus even includes this warning, “But,” [the Lord] said, “you cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live.”⁴

God is the source of all that was, is, and will be. God is the start of all things. God is the sustainer of all things. And, ultimately, God is where all things will return to. God is the end of all things then too. “‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God,

¹ Isaiah 6:1c (NRSVue)

² Psalm 29:6, 8

³ Isaiah 55:9

⁴ Exodus 33:20

who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”⁵ And again, later in the same book, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.”⁶

God is communal. God’s very nature is not singular. Jesus, the Word, expresses this beautifully in our Gospel text today. God is Spirit, God is source, and God is our savior. God is the Spirit through whom we are re-created and born “anew.” God is the source of all life in, and all love for, the cosmos. God is the means of our healing and wholeness. In the beginning there was God...in the beginning there was Relationship. That is the starting point of creation...a communal God who creates a communal cosmos.

But what does this really mean?! How can God be communal? How can any entity be more than itself? And here we’ve arrived back where we began: up against the limit of our understanding. Finding God to be ineffable...overwhelming...holy and wholly “other.” And yet...

Perhaps it’s our desire to understand, to comprehend and categorize, that leads to our limitation in this endeavor. Three centuries after the life, death, and resurrection of Christ the Cappadocian mystics eventually concluded this about the Trinity, about the nature of God: Whatever is going on in God is a *flow*, a *radical relatedness*, a *perfect communion* between Three – a circle dance of love.

Brother Elias Marechal sums this mystical thought up well in his book, *Tears of an Innocent God*:

“The ancient Greek Fathers depict the Trinity as a Round Dance: an event that has continued for six thousand years, and six times six thousand, and beyond the time when humans *first* knew time. An infinite current of love streams without ceasing, *to and fro, to and fro, to and fro*: gliding from the Father to the Son, and back to the Father, in one timeless happening. This circular current of trinitarian love continues night and day... The orderly and rhythmic process of subatomic particles spinning round and round at immense speed echoes its dynamism.”⁷

In the end, seeking to know or understand God is a largely fruitless endeavor. Developing doctrines and theories is all well and good, but those will find their limits. What those mystics eventually concluded, and what I hope you take away from this sermon, is that relationship with God is the best means for us to know God in a

⁵ Revelation 1:8

⁶ Revelation 22:13

⁷ Elias Marechal, *Tears of an Innocent God*, New York:Paulist Press, 2015, p. 7.

meaningful way. And that is God's goal, God fervently desires to be in relationship with us.

Out of the deep desire, God makes room for us within the divine dance, within the flow of trinitarian love. God invites us, and the entire cosmos, into the space that God has made for us in the dance. God wants us to join in this loving, creative, and redemptive communion. What a gift! What an amazing opportunity. We need not know or understand God...we can simply **be** with God. And that existence within the dance...within the flow of God's love, is all we need be concerned with. Here is the freedom we find in God, the freedom to simply be loved and be loving. The freedom to simply...be. Amen.