Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Trinity Sunday

First Sunday after Pentecost

May 27, 2018

Neal MacPherson

ONE GOD IN COMMUNITY Isaiah 6:1–8

Psalm 29

Romans 8:12–17

John 3:1–17

This morning I have decided to preach on the subject

of the Trinity (I’m sure you are thrilled!). It is my very first time ever to devote a sermon to this subject, which only goes to prove that you are bringing out the best, or perhaps the worst in me! But it is, after all, Trinity Sunday in the church calendar, so here goes!

I have to begin by saying that the word “Trinity” is not a word to be found in the Bible. At the same time, we can also say that the Doctrine of the Trinity was an attempt by the Christian Community in the fourth and fifth centuries to respond to questions that arise from reading the Newer Testament. It is clear that the early Christians professed Jesus to be their “Lord and Savior.” But is this “Lord and Savior” different from God? Or perhaps a lesser “Lord and Savior” than God? Or, is Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, the same as God? And if Jesus is the same as God, what happens to his humanity? Is Jesus only God, or is Jesus also human?

And the same questions arise when we read about the Holy Spirit. It sounds as if the Spirit, whose life and work are celebrated in this morning’s scripture readings, is somehow independent from God, or is the Spirit the same as God? And what is the relationship between the Spirit and Jesus the Christ?

Basically, all these questions are summed up in one question: how are God, Christ, and Holy Spirit related? Last Sunday, just after the Confirmation students were asked to profess their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, everyone was asked: Question: *Do you believe in God?* Response: *I believe in God.* Question: *Do you believe in Jesus Christ?* Response: *I believe in Jesus Christ.* Question: *Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?* Response:

*I believe in the Holy Spirit*.

Are these three different realities, or one undivided reality? This is the question. To answer the question, The Council of Nicaea in the year 325 and later the Council of Chalcedon in the year 451 came up with the doctrine of the Trinity, which simply stated is summarized in the closing words of the hymn “*Holy, Holy, Holy,”—“God in three persons, blessed Trinity.”*

It seems as though God is both one and also three. Somehow, I find this formula, “Three in One” unsatisfactory. To me, it is just a little formulaic, just a little too abstract. It does not capture me, emotionally. And my dissatisfaction has only intensified as I have studied the nuances of a few Greek words that informed the Doctrine of the Trinity.

You will be relieved that I am not going to get into that! What I will attempt to do, with the help of my good theologian friend Douglas John Hall, is to begin to re-shape the way we speak about the Trinity.

Let us begin with the ways in which we of the Christian community experience God. We are no saying that our ways are the only ways—the Buddhist, the Jew, the Hindu all have their own ways of experiencing the divine, which are no more or less valid than the Christian experience of God. Also, let us say that God is a mystery, and that any of our words or doctrines can never be equated with the Truth with a capital “T.”

Can we say that within the context of the Christian community, our first experience of God is through the created order? We experience the beauty and wonder of creation and of our own bodies, minds, and spirits, and we are led to profess our faith in God as the Creator of all that is. In the words of Genesis:

In the beginning when God created the heavens

and the earth, the earth was a formless void and

darkness covered the face of the deep, while a

wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there

was light. —Genesis:1:1–2

And in the words of the Psalmist:

*I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully*

*made.*

*Wonderful are your works;*

*That I know very well.* —Psalm 139:14

Through our contemplation of the created order and our lives as human beings, we experience God as Creator. But this is not enough. For we believe that God is not only a Creator, transcendent, high and lifted up, as this morning’s reading from Isaiah declares, but we also believe that God is present, and continuously involved in the creation and in human life and history. And this leads us as Christians to look to Jesus Christ as the incarnation of God in the earth and in human life. His name is also “Emmanuel”—God-with-us. We look to Jesus not only as a teacher, although he is surely that. But we believe that his life, his ministry, his death and resurrection, reveal the nature of God. God is not only a God who is present when good and pleasant things happen. The suffering of Jesus reveals that God is also present with the creation and with us in the midst of the earth’s suffering and our suffering. God weeps when the earth suffers. God weeps when we weep. God is present with us and for us, with the creation and for the creation. It is said that if you want to know what God is like, you need only to look to Jesus. Jesus reveals God to be a God of love, a God of compassion, a God who in Jesus Christ suffers with us and for us, and with and for the entire creation, bringing forth newness of life. And so we as Christians are led to profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

But, again, this is not quite enough. For how does God in Christ Jesus continue to be present among us, bringing forth new life and hope? It is through the Spirit of God that we are continually being brought to life. The Spirit of God comes upon us as fire and wind, and is as close to us as our own breath. The Spirit was present with God in creation. The Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism. And in John’s Gospel, Jesus says that he will not leave us orphaned, but promises that “the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” (John 14:26)

And so the church’s experience of God is centered in knowing God as Creator, God as Christ, and God as Holy Spirit. These are all expressions of the one God who dwells beyond us and with us. This God we worship and honor each time we sing the Doxology:

*Praise God from whom all blessings flow;*

*Praise God all creatures here below;*

*Praise God above ye heavenly host;*

*Creator, Christ, and Holy Ghost. Amen.*

It is as if God as Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit form a community, the members of which cannot be separated one from another. The hymn we will soon sing states it well:

*Praise the Maker, Christ, and Spirit,*

*one God in community.*

How rich and diverse and profound is our experience of God, this God whom we adore. How good it is to be part of a Christian community that has come to know God as the Holy One who has created us and all things, who has come to us, who suffers with us and who gives us life in Jesus the Christ, and who has given us the gift of the Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God.