

“Trusting in a Dancing God” based on John 3:1-21, (Genesis 1, Proverbs 30:4, Numbers 21:5-9)

Delivered on May 30, 2021 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

Today’s reading from the gospel of John is one of the most famous in all of scripture. It is a meeting between Jesus and a Pharisee named Nicodemus, who has witnessed Jesus’s teaching and his miracles and wants to know more. He admits that from what he has seen, that he and other teachers seem to believe that Jesus must be sent by God in some way. Perhaps, he recognizes that Jesus may be a prophet, but he does not seem to understand anything more.

And so, Jesus offers him a play on words – He says that unless someone is born from above, they will be unable to perceive, to see, to know the Reign of God. This phrase, ‘born from above,’ uses a Greek idiom similar to one we use today. Anyone who has ever been to a play rehearsal or a choir practice, may know it well. When someone wants something done again, I can hear Rick saying this, they might say, ‘Okay everyone, let’s take it from the top.’ We know this to mean, let’s do it again. That is ‘from above.’

And so, this is how Nicodemus hears the phrase and asks, ‘How can someone living be born?’ Indeed, he perceives this to be a second physical birth, to re-enter a womb and be born. And so, Jesus presents that this rebirth is both physical – of water – baptism, yet also, it is spiritual, born of the Spirit, both needed to enter God’s Reign. *‘That which is born of flesh, is flesh,’* as in, ‘that which is natural is natural.’ But *‘that which is born of the Spirit,’* well, that’s spiritual. This is not a wonder, or something to marvel at, but it is the simple and plain truth of God’s Reign. To see it, to enter it, requires this birth. Indeed, it is a simple necessity.

Last week, we celebrated Pentecost, and I asked you, ‘How is it that you perceive God?’ I asked this because when we think of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in each one, we have different ways of perceiving and knowing God. When we think of a father, it is natural to think of God looking down on us, lovingly seeing us as adopted children, gazing down on us in delight. And when we think of God as Son, we see God in solidarity with us, knowing what it is to be in our limits, and still be beloved. And I said, scripture shows us the Spirit, as God by our side, advocating for us, interceding for us, calling out for us, as God with us.

This is just as the great African theologian Augustine of Hippo liked to portray the Trinity. He showed us God the lover, God the beloved, and God who is love itself. And so today, on this Trinity Sunday, I want to lay down this very foundation. Indeed, it is the primary belief that ties together all who are Christians, namely that our scripture reveals that the one being of God, is for us three distinct persons. Yes, that Yahweh, the Lord, the creator of all things, who is revealed in the pages of Hebrew scripture, is and always has been three persons, contained in the one and only God.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that the Spirit, or as it’s usually translated, ‘the wind,’ blows where it wishes. Indeed, the *‘pneuma,’* to use the Greek term for wind, breath, or Spirit, is not seen. Yet it may be heard, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. Jesus says this is how it is for everyone who is born of the Spirit. And this baffles Nicodemus, who wonders how this can be, that we must be born of a Spirit that acts on its own accord.

And then Jesus questions Nicodemus as a teacher, asking how he missed this in the Hebrew scriptures. The word Trinity is not found in the Old or New Testaments, but the idea is very present. In the opening words of Genesis 1, the very first book of the Hebrew Scriptures, we read that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and God created them out of nothing by speaking them into being, and the Spirit went out to hover over the waters, over the chaos, to bring order and life to what was spoken into being. In Hebrew, the word for God is singular, yet plural. By this, it is used for the One True God, yet, it appears in Hebrew as a plural noun. Yes, God says let 'us' make humans, in our 'own' image, in 'our' likeness.

This is not how our sisters and brothers in the Jewish faith read these texts, but as Christians, through the revelation of Jesus as God and the Holy Spirit as God, we can see in Genesis this concept of Trinity – One God in three persons. The one God whose name is Yahweh, meaning, 'I am who I am,' or as it can also be translated, 'I am who I will be,' is and always has been, a being in perfect relationship, as a co-equal Father and Son loving one another, in and through the co-equal Holy Spirit.

Now, I want to cut Nicodemus and our modern-day Jewish friends some slack here, because without the light that Jesus sheds on the Hebrew scriptures, it would be impossible to see this. As one great theologian put it a century ago, this is an eternal truth that was present, but unseen in darkness, and it is only by Jesus, the light revealed in the New Testament, that we are able to see it, to perceive it in all scripture. For as Jesus told Nicodemus, to perceive God's reign, requires being born from above, from the Spirit.

Jesus says as much about this revelation, when, while talking to just Nicodemus, he moves to the plural 'you all.' Perhaps, Jesus here is speaking in his divine person, as God speaking in scripture. Perhaps, more simply, Jesus is referring to Nicodemus and all his students, but he says that, *'If you did not trust me when I spoke of earthly things, why would I expect you to trust me when I speak of heavenly things?'* I personally lean toward the divine here because of what comes next: *'No one has gone up into heaven, except the one from out of heaven, having come down—the Son of Man.'*

Here, Jesus is speaking of who he is, and I believe he is alluding to Proverbs 30, verse 4. The Old and New Testaments are closely connected. In this verse, Agur is inspired to say to Ithiel, whose name means the 'signs/words of God.' Agur says he does not have wisdom and people lack the Holy One's knowledge, for only God has gone up to heaven and come down, gathered the winds, established the ends of the earth, and Agur asks, *'What is his name? And what is the name of his Son? Surely, you know.'*

Jesus then uses this to tie himself to a scene in Numbers, where Moses lifts a cross with a bronze snake, a symbol of the poisonous creature that was biting and killing the people of Israel. It's a strange scene for the people because Moses who declared for God 'you shall not make graven images,' holds up a graven image on a cross. And in holding up this dead idol on a cross, the people look at it and are healed. Jesus here is connecting the promise to Adam of a future descendant, who would crush the serpent that deceived Adam and Eve, but be bitten and killed,

and uses it to foreshadow, his own coming death on the cross of Calvary. Jesus says, *'Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, thus it is necessary, for the Son of Man, to be lifted up,'* by which he means the cross, and, also, the resurrection, *'so everyone trusting in him, may have eternal life.'* And then comes the clincher.

*'For God,'* speaking of the Father, *'so loved the world that he gave his Son, the only begotten, so that everyone trusting in him should not be destroyed, but should possess eternal life.'* Yes, John 3:16 is well known, but the depth of this statement is incredible. You see, Jesus speaks words that affirm what John had said in the prologue of his gospel, that in the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God and the Word was God. John phrased it this way to allude to Genesis 1 which I quoted earlier. But after Jesus brings in Proverbs and Numbers from the Old Testament, Jesus's words also tie back to the end of John's prologue, in which he describes the word as *'the only begotten God.'*

This term *'only begotten'* is a term for unique, the one and only. It means that Jesus is One in being with God and bears the name of God as God's son. Thus, he is answering Agur's question to Ithiel, *'What is his name? Surely you know.'* Nicodemus as one of the leading Pharisees, would have known what Jesus meant here. He may not have understood being born from above, but this was his language, for the Pharisees knew their scriptures, and they knew the Messianic promises. Jesus has presented for him three equal beings all contained in One God.

The Father, whom Nicodemus likely thought was all there was, and now, the revelation of the Son as Lord, Yahweh, also, and a personal Holy Spirit as Lord, Yahweh, too. Here the Trinity is revealed not as a teaching, but to be experienced, and yet, Nicodemus, struggles with it. So, as fun as it is to see how the Old and New Testaments are interwoven revelation, the question now that you may have is simple: Why does all of this matter?

The answer is that this is the foundation of our faith and of what we call the good news. You see, the *'good news'* isn't good news without it, because it reveals for us a God who exists and always has existed, not as a lonely being who needs creation, but in eternal relationship, from whom creation flows, loved, beloved and filled with love.

The Father did not send the Son to judge the world, but to save the creation that God loves. This is not because God needs the creation to know love and be loved, but because God loves us and all of creation and longs to bring light to us. This light comes through the only-begotten God, the Son, who lived as we live and died for us.

Friends, the Trinity is a mystery, but it is a balance – it is our God in a cosmic dance – between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, all one, working as one, but each distinct. It is a community in relationship that creates out of a desire to share God's own life. This is what eternal life is – to be brought into this relationship of God – to know that by God being the source of all things, is our Father, and by God our creator to sharing in our life, in the Son, we share in God's life through the love of the Spirit.

This is something theologians call 'perichoresis.' I love this word because '*peri-*' means around and '*choresis*' comes from the same root as 'choreography.' This is the dance of God centered on God's self-giving love. This is the relationship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in One eternal being. Each is united in will and purpose eternally, but each one unique and distinct, or holy. This is what makes the Good News truly good news – God is love, self-giving love. God is not some distant being, but in the Son suffered and died for us, and in the Spirit, groans at our side, calling us to the Father. Each one is co-equal, fully the being of God, yet distinct, none is subordinate to the other, none is created, for all are the divine, eternal being we call God.

This is why the dance matters: Because each person in the Godhead is necessary to it. There may be times when one appears to be leading, but all are moving together. There may be a difference in function, but this is not an inferiority of nature, to quote James R. White in his great book, 'The Forgotten Trinity.' This is our faith, this is what we put our trust in, that from Genesis to Revelation, all of scripture is a love story, between a Father and a Son in and through the Spirit, sharing that love by creating all things – seen and unseen – to share in God's life, which is both abundant – all encompassing – and eternal.

And so, on this Trinity Sunday, I pray you love the Trinity as I do, and if nothing else, recognize that you are desired (not needed) by God, created by God, called and loved by God, for indeed you are chosen by one perfect God, who is and always will be devoted to your having life that is complete now and forever. Amen.

# Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)  
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in ***bold italics***.

John 3:1-21 (Pastor's Translation) Now, there was a man from among the ***Pharisees***. His name was Nicodemus, a ***ruler*** of the ***Judeans***. He came to Jesus by ***night*** and said to Him, '***Rabbi***, we ***observe*** that you are a ***teacher*** that has come from God, for no one is able to do the ***signs*** that you do if God should not be with him.' Jesus ***responded*** and said to him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you that if anyone is not ***born*** from above, they are not able to perceive the Reign of God.' Nicodemus said, 'How is a ***human***, who is old, able to be born? ***People*** are not able to ***enter*** into the ***womb*** of their ***mother*** a second ***time*** and be born.' Jesus responded, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone is not born of ***water*** and of the Spirit, they are not able to enter the ***Reign*** of God. That which has been born of the ***flesh***, is flesh. And that which is born of the Spirit, is spirit. Do not ***marvel*** that I said to you (all) that it is necessary to be born from above. The Spirit ***blows*** where it ***wishes***, and you ***hear*** the ***sound*** of it, but you do not know where it comes from, or where it goes. This is how it is for everyone who has been born of the ***Spirit***.' ***Nicodemus*** responded and said to him, 'How are these things able to be?' ***Jesus*** responded and said to him, 'You are a teacher of ***Israel*** and you do not know this? Truly, truly, I say to you, that what we ***perceive***, we ***speak***, and what we have seen, we ***bear*** witness to, and you (all) do not ***receive*** our ***witness***. If I have ***told*** you (all) of ***earthly*** things and you (all) do not have faith, how if I tell to you all heavenly ***things***, will you (all) trust? No one has gone up into heaven, except the one from out of heaven, having come down - the Son of ***Man***. And just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, thus it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up, so that everyone believing in him may have eternal life. For, ***God*** so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, so that everyone trusting in him should not be destroyed, but should possess eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world in order that he should judge the world, but in order that the world should be saved through him. The one trusting in him is not judged, but the one not trusting in him has already been judged because he has not trusted in the name of the only-begotten Son of God. But this is the judgement: That the light has entered into the world, and humanity loved darkness rather than the light for their deeds were hurtful. For everyone practicing wickedness hates the light and does not come from the light, in order that his works should not be exposed. However, the one practicing the truth comes to the light in order that his works should be revealed as having been done in God's will.