

## How to Understand the Trinity

Text: John 1:1-5, 10-18

*Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on May 30, 2021*

This morning we're going to hit one full question and pieces of two others. Someone requested a sermon on the Trinity and it's Trinity Sunday, so that one wins the main topic for this week. But I also received a more general question on how to read the Bible as well as one that came in last week wanting sermons on other religions. That last one could go on for a year all by itself, but the topic of the Trinity gives us a chance to say a bit about each of the other questions, so I hope that at least three of you will find the sermon relevant.

For the Scripture reading, I'm going to read from John 1:1-5, and 10-18. Then I'm going to read a verse from the Qur'an and then we'll talk about why Muslims and Christians are often talking past each other when it comes to the Trinity and how we might clean that up at least a little bit.

First up, John.

<sup>1</sup> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup> in him was life,<sup>[a]</sup> and the life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

<sup>10</sup> He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. <sup>11</sup> He came to what was his own,<sup>[c]</sup> and his own people did not accept him. <sup>12</sup> But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, <sup>13</sup> who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

<sup>14</sup> And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son,<sup>[d]</sup> full of grace and truth. <sup>15</sup> (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") <sup>16</sup> From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. <sup>17</sup> The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup> No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son,<sup>[e]</sup> who is close to the Father's heart,<sup>[f]</sup> who has made him known.

The second reading is from the Qur'an. The Qur'an doesn't have books, like the Bible has. It has just 144 chapters (also called surahs) and verses. The chapters do have names, but you can cite it either way. What I'm going to read might be called Chapter 23, verse 91; Surah 23, verse 91; or by the chapter's name, The Believers, verse 91.

So here's what Surah 23, verse 91 says: "Never has God begotten a son, nor is there any other God beside him."

A number of years ago I decided to read the Qur'an cover to cover. Some version of the verse I just read appeared time and time again as a recurring theme: "Never has God begotten a son, nor is there any other God beside him." Clearly the Prophet Muhammad, who dictated the Qur'an in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century, wanted to make a point, and that point seemed to be laser-focused on the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

The oldest known Islamic inscription appears on the oldest Islamic building, the Dome of the Rock, which sits on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and dates to the year 688. A translation of the Arabic reads in part: "Oh, People of the Book! Don't be excessive in the name of your faith! Do not say things about God but the truth! The Messiah Jesus, son of Mary, is indeed a messenger of God: The Almighty extended a word to Mary, and a spirit too. So believe in God and all the messengers, and stop talking about a Trinity. Cease in your own best interests! Verily God is the God of unity. Lord Almighty! That God would beget a child? Either in the Heavens or on the Earth?..."

Clearly this inscription is targeting the doctrine of the Trinity. Christians and Muslims have fought about this for well over a thousand years now, and the battles haven't always been limited to words. But as I read the Qur'an and heard its repeated insistence that God did not, and in fact could not, beget a child, I found myself talking back to it and saying, "But Christians don't teach that!" Because we don't.

It is not now and has never been Christian doctrine that God physically gave birth to a child—son, daughter, none of it. As Jesus explains to the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:24, "God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and in truth." Christian faith does **not** teach that God is a top deity who gave birth to a second deity named "Jesus" or "the Son" or anything like it. Christians believe, just like Jews and Muslims, that there is one God. End of story.

So how did we get to such a deep and long misunderstanding? Basically, it's John's fault. If we did not have the Gospel of John in our Bibles, we would be hard pressed to come up with the doctrine of the Trinity as we have it. The doctrine is nowhere in the Bible—it was pieced together from a variety of Bible passages by the Councils of the early church; but even those pieces could not have fit together if it were not for John's gospel. And it all begins because John likes metaphors, and we like to take things literally.

We hear it first in John's prologue that I just read: "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." And again, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." John goes on to use the title "Son of God" more than twenty times in his gospel, not counting the reference to "only begotten Son," which happens in John 3:16, one of the most famous verses in the entire Bible.

The thing is, John is the mystic among the gospel writers. He writes in metaphors, symbols, and layers, and to take his words literally can lead to frequent and often tragic mistakes. Some have said that Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written to describe what happened and that John was written to describe what it all meant.

And in his philosophical and theological prologue that I read, John lays out what the phrase "Son of God" means both to him and to the Christian community he represents. What Christians add is not a new god, but a unique action of the one God—the action that John names in the prologue to his gospel: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us."

Where we start to get confused is in the next line, when John starts talking about the glory of God. That fourteenth verse continues, "and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." John is using a metaphor, saying that the glory of God that could be seen in Jesus was the kind of thing you see when a father has one son—you're not looking at the father

directly, but everything the father stands for has come to life in that man's son. We mean something similar when we say "a chip off the old block" or "the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

John keeps the metaphor going down in verse 18, writing, "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." John then continues to use "son" language in several other places in his gospel, most famously in John 3:16. The King James Version (published in 1611) likes to use the phrase "only begotten" to translate the Greek word *monogenes* in John 3:16 and elsewhere, but that has added unnecessary problems. *Monogenes* means "unique" and has nothing to do with a person's physical birth or origins.

This Son language (like the born-again language earlier in John 3) is not meant to be taken literally. It's just hard to describe spiritual mysteries without using some concrete metaphor people can relate to. John wants to describe the Christian belief that Jesus was actually God incarnate, but he wants to do it in a way that doesn't end up with someone asking, "Well, if Jesus is God, who is he praying to?" So John reaches for a metaphor that was familiar both in his age and ours—the metaphor of a son who both is and is not his father.

It's an imperfect metaphor to be sure, but as metaphors go, it isn't bad. And, really, using metaphors for talk about God is much better than pretending we can dissect and describe God's nature like we might diagram the mechanics of a toaster. I mean, who do we think we are? Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 13 that here on this earth humans see only as if through a dirty glass and understand only in part.

Unfortunately for interfaith relations, we have ignored any warnings of our human limitations and gone on to describe all the mechanics and intricacies of the Godhead as if we knew what we were talking about, most notably in the creeds of the early church.

With each successive council and creed in the centuries after Jesus' death, the Church authorities became more and more arrogant in their belief that they could define the nature of God, God's incarnation in Jesus, and God's presence in the Holy Spirit in thorough and complete detail. You can read two such attempts, the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene creed in the back of our hymnals.

Their final attempt, the creed they produced at the Council of Chalcedon in the fifth century is, thankfully, not in our hymnal at all. I'll read you my favorite part. Talking about Jesus, it says he is:

"One and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ;"

"Inconfusedly?" I mean, come on. If the Muslims inscribing the Dome of the Rock a couple hundred years later had read the Chalcedonian creed, I can understand why they wanted to tell us to cease talking about the Trinity for our own best interest!

"For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known." Those words from Paul should be a disclaimer on every creed we have.

What the church was *trying* to do in creating the doctrine of the Trinity was to clean up the misunderstanding created by the many Christians who started to take John's metaphors literally. They wanted to say, "No wait—we're not talking about three gods here. We're talking about three major but different ways that God's spirit is made known to us." A noble goal. But instead of helping, the formal church authorities went down a rabbit hole and ended up making things infinitely worse and then burning people at the stake who wouldn't assent to what they believed was inconfusedly clear.

There are many analogies for what the Trinity means, but as soon as you pick one there's going to be someone who pipes up to tell you you're a heretic and that's not how it is at all.

When John Wesley, the Anglican priest who founded Methodism more than a thousand years after the Council of Chalcedon, was asked about the Trinity, here's what he said, "You believe there is such a thing as light, whether flowing from the sun or any other luminous body. But you cannot comprehend either its nature or the manner wherein it flows. How does it move from Jupiter to the earth...in a moment? How do the rays of the candle brought into the room instantly disperse into every corner? Here are three candles, yet there is but one light. Explain this, and I will explain the Three-in-One God."

We know more about the science of light today than Wesley did, but I feel pretty confident in saying that we don't know one iota more than Wesley or the early church fathers or the disciples or any human ever about the exact nature of the all-encompassing Spirit that we call God. We see only through a dim mirror, a dark glass while in this mortal life.

For millions of people across the last two thousand years recognizing that Jesus was God—the Word made flesh—changed their lives. Jesus as God confirms that I need have no fear in approaching God; and the Holy Spirit as God means I can meet and know God in the here and now and even allow myself to be used by God to help others. So I'm not ready to ditch the concept of the Trinity just because it's so frequently misunderstood as literal, biological relationships. But neither am I ready to engage the theological contortions of trying to describe the exact nature of something that ultimately is beyond my ken. When I finally meet God face to face, if it's not inconfusedly evident in the moment, I'll ask. Amen.