

Trinity Sunday – Teresa Holden

Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 29; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

Today is Trinity Sunday, the Sunday after Pentecost, and a day on which we celebrate and honor the Triune nature of God or, said in another way, the concept of God as three-in-one. This is an idea that is so basic to our faith, but one that really tests the barriers of our comprehension. I did a little research about Trinity Sunday, so that I could find some way of clearly explaining this idea of Trinity, the coequal existence of God, the Father; Jesus, the Son of God; and the Holy Spirit. While I found some good documentation about the origins of Trinity Sunday, I learned that my own difficulty with verbalizing a good description of the Trinity is not only a universal problem, but it also leads one into dangerous territory. Here is what one source says:

The Trinity is one of the most fascinating – and controversial – Christian dogmas. The Trinity is a mystery. By mystery the Church does not mean a riddle, but rather the Trinity is a reality above our human comprehension that we may begin to grasp, but ultimately must know through worship, symbol, and faith. It has been said that mystery is not a wall to run up against, but an ocean in which to swim. (here is the clincher) The common wisdom is that if you talk about the Trinity for longer than a few minutes you will slip into heresy because you are probing the depths of God too deeply.

Obviously, if true, this is quite problematic for my sermon. I don't really want to step into heresy, but I've never known St. Paul's to shy away from difficult topics, so I will fearlessly, forge ahead.

Actually, today's Scriptures offer us some good ways to try to understand God. I believe if we begin by accepting on faith that God is Triune, or 3 in one, whatever we learn about His nature can help us to understand His totality. Starting from that premise, I think, makes everything easier.

What today's Scriptures make clear about God is that He is all-powerful, all-knowing and always and totally present within His creation. Yet along with these characteristics that emphasize our smallness and God's vastness is another inescapable characteristic of God – He is always reaching out to us, making a way for us to have communion with Him. These very same Scriptures also lead us to see that mysteriously and miraculously God leads us into relationship with Him. This is always His goal – to redeem us, so that we can be with Him, and further, so that we can increasingly embody His goodness and compassion and love. God possesses these seemingly contradictory attributes, both being totally above us and totally with us, in full force always, or 24/7, within our manmade conceptions of time and space.

Today's Old Testament Scriptures place God in settings where particular earthly phenomena occur that illustrate His all-encompassing power. In Isaiah, God's power makes the earth tremble (like an earthquake); in Psalm 29 not only does the earth quake, but evidence of Him is apparent in thunder, in fire (like a volcano) and in the leveling of the giant cedars of Lebanon (like the work of a straight-line wind or a tornado). This is something we can all identify with. We understand the unspeakable power of weather and geological events.

Anyone who lives in the Midwest has a weather story. Even the youngest among us can recognize the power that is imminent when the skies begin to darken and the winds begin to shift. The threat of a tornado sends us to our basements as we try to escape the devastating power of a funnel cloud. Other natural events also give us a sense of power that is both terrible and awesome at the same time.

On January 16, 1994 at 4:00 in the morning, my family awoke to our southern California house shaking ferociously. As I scrambled to find my glasses, I could make out my husband's form, as he crawled to the hallway to get to our daughters' bedrooms. He was unable to walk upright because he couldn't keep his balance against the fierce shaking. Before I became thoroughly terrified and because I really can't see without glasses or contacts, I momentarily lay in bed listening to the sounds of an earthquake, and I, frankly, was surprised that earthquakes have a particular sound. For one thing, it sounded like a train was going right through our house, as though I were sitting at a railroad crossing. Additionally, I could hear glass items crashing to the floor in other rooms. The shaking was so violent that I actually could hear the pressure it was placing on our house. I remember thinking, "If this lasts 10 seconds longer, every window in my house is going to break." But then the magnitude 6.8 quake stopped, as suddenly as it had started. Without electricity in our home, we gathered the girls into a bedroom doorway to wait out the aftershocks until daybreak. Sitting in that doorway, I can remember being overcome with trembling, physically reacting to what had just happened. This helps me to be able to understand Isaiah's reaction when he found himself in the presence of God.

In Isaiah, he not only experiences the earth shaking, he finds himself in the very presence of God, Himself. In verse 5 he says in response to recognizing exactly where he was (in the New American Standard version): "Woe is me, for I am ruined. Because I am a man of unclean lips." For him God's power was awesomely overwhelming, and he completely understood his own smallness, weakness and sinfulness in the presence of Almighty God. Yet, here, as in each of these Scriptures today, God makes a way for Isaiah to be in His presence. A touch of burning coal to his lips brings a symbolic cleansing to Isaiah's condition. God forgives his sins, so that they can be in communion together.

Similarly, in Psalm 29, we are reminded of all of the ways in which God's power is in evidence throughout nature. His power upholds and directs all natural events, yet, again in this Psalm, in the end God's people are reconciled to him. The last verse explains, "The Lord will give strength to His people; the Lord will bless His people with peace."

Our lectionary, through these Old Testament Scriptures, leads us to recognize God, the Father, Yahweh, the all-Powerful God of the world's first monotheistic people. The monotheism of the children of Abraham distinguished them from all other people in the ancient world. For them, God was not embodied in the Pharaoh, or other ancient rulers. He transcended all earthly conceptions. Perfectly just and righteous, Yahweh cared for His chosen people. No matter how often they messed up, because of His great love for them, He helped them to find a way back into His presence. All of this foreshadows the closer, more intimate relationship that becomes possible to believers through the appearance of Jesus, God's very son who offers immediate and constant redemption to those who want to have a relationship with Him.

In John, we see Jesus explaining His own role and purpose to Nicodemus who recognizes that Jesus is a great teacher. Yet, Nicodemus has questions. Here, Jesus explains the qualifications for being in God's kingdom or having a relationship with God. He says that this requires a spiritual rebirth. This mysterious rebirth that allows people to have a relationship with God is possible, Jesus says, because of two factors: First, His own death and resurrection and second, the work of the Holy Spirit that allows people to enter into a closer and more intimate relationship with God.

Romans 8 further explains the Holy Spirit as the force that allows believers to even have faith and to have the courage to stand by their convictions and believe in the face of great doubt and all negative circumstances. Interestingly, the presence of the Holy Spirit also brings God's power to believers. Acts 1 tells about the power to share their faith believers will receive when the Holy Spirit comes. In Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus, He talks about believers, those who have experienced the rebirth offered through the Holy Spirit, using His own weather analogy. He says these believers are like the wind: "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

All of these factors comprise the miracle of the Trinity. The Jews understood Yahweh was but one God. He was preeminent, above all earthly conceptions, totally powerful and completely revealed through His creation. He cared for them, His Chosen People, to whom He gave forgiveness and redemption through their sacrifices and acts of worship. In time, His love for all people would be revealed as He offered redemption through the life and death of His very Son, Jesus Christ, whose deity would be translated into humankind's understanding through the work of the Holy Spirit. But how does the Holy Spirit act like a wind within believers? This mystery is much clearer to me through a story that is told by John Lewis, the U. S. Representative from the state of Georgia who tells the story of the American Civil Rights movement in his memoir, entitled *Walking with the Wind*.

Lewis tells a story from his childhood sometime in the mid-1940's in Alabama, a story in which he and fourteen of his cousins, all children of sharecroppers were gathered at the home of their Aunt Seneva. Here is how Lewis tells the story:

On this particular afternoon – it was a Saturday, I'm almost certain – about fifteen of us children were outside my aunt Seneva's house, playing in her dirt yard. The sky began clouding over, the wind started picking up, lightning flashed far off in the distance, and suddenly I wasn't thinking about playing anymore: I was terrified. . . .

Lightning terrified me, and so did thunder. My mother used to gather us around her whenever we heard thunder and she'd tell us to hush, be still now, because God was doing his work. That was what thunder was, my mother said. It was the sound of God doing his work.

But my mother wasn't with us on this particular afternoon. Aunt Seneva was the only adult around, and as the sky blackened and the wind grew stronger, she herded us all inside.

Her house was not the biggest place around, and it seemed even smaller with so many children squeezed inside. Small and surprisingly quiet. All of the shouting and laughter that had been going on earlier, outside, had stopped. The wind was howling now, and the house was starting to shake. We were scared. Even Aunt Seneva was scared.

And then it got worse. Now the house was beginning to sway. The wood plank flooring beneath us began to bend. And then, a corner of the room started lifting up.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. None of us could. This storm was actually pulling the house toward the sky. With us inside it.

That was when Aunt Seneva told us to clasp hands. Line up and hold hands, she said, and we did as we were told. Then she had us walk as a group toward the corner of the room that was rising. From the kitchen to the front of the house we walked, the wind screaming outside, sheets of rain beating on the tin roof. Then we walked back in the other direction, as another end of the house began to lift.

And so it went, back and forth, fifteen children walking with the wind, holding that trembling house down with the weight of our small bodies.

More than half a century has passed since that day, and it has struck me more than once over those many years that our society is not unlike the children in that house, rocked again and again by the winds of one storm or another, the walls around us seeming at times as if they might fly apart.

It seemed that way in the 1960s, at the height of the civil rights movement, when America itself felt as if it might burst at the seams – so much tension, so many storms. But the people of conscience never left the house. They never ran away. They stayed,

they came together and they did the best they could, clasping hands and moving toward the corner of the house that was the weakest.

And then another corner would lift, and we would go there.

And eventually, inevitably, the storm would settle, and the house would still stand.

But we knew another storm would come, and we would have to do it all over again.

And we did.

And we still do, all of us. You and I.

Children holding hands, walking with the wind.

This illustration helps me to understand what it means to be carried by this wind of the Spirit of God. Like the children in the story, we follow where the wind takes us, going to those places that seem to be most in need of our help, and we do this together, as a community of believers. Ours is a faith full of mystery, but also sure as we have confidence in God's revelations to us. These revelations come in big and unmistakable ways sometimes – at times through the very creation itself. Sometimes they come in mysterious, even unexplainable ways, but through prayer and faith and community we are able to walk with the wind, and grow in our relationship with God.

<http://asktm.blogspot.com/2005/10/whats-difference-between-apostles.html>