

**Trinity Sunday (Year B) – May 31, 2015**  
**Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 29; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17**  
**By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean**

**Trinity and Unity as Experience and Relationship**

Each year, on this first Sunday immediately following Pentecost, we observe Trinity Sunday. After the hot moment of the tongues aflame of Pentecost, are we, this Trinity Sunday, just throwing cold water on ourselves—dousing the flame with a dogma, with a complicated and paradoxical doctrine of a Triune God—One in Three, Three in One? Well, yes, if we look at the Trinity as an historically encrusted, semantically confusing doctrine about God; or as some literal truth that smothers deeper truths of God. The doctrine of the Trinity, of course, can be felt like a splash of cold water—after all, how enthused can you get about a doctrine, especially one as seemingly complicated as the Holy Trinity?

On the other hand, the Pentecostal flame isn't doused by becoming Trinitarian, if we see our language (albeit limited,) as a way of opening to (and being opened by) God, the One who is constantly reaching to us, as God did with Isaiah and Nicodemus in our readings—the One who invites us into relationship and to join God's mission of repairing the world and restoring all to right relationships—the One who, despite all appearances notwithstanding, is the *One* and Living God.<sup>i</sup>

This notion of a God—three in one, one in three—doesn't just begin in the doctrinal debates of the fourth century, nor even in the New Testament. The first allusion to the One God who appears, or is experienced, as three is found in the heart of the Book of Genesis, when, in the eighteenth chapter, Abraham and his wife Sarah are visited by three mysterious folk whom Abraham greets in the singular, by saying, "My Lord..." The whole chapter goes back and forth in the singular and plural. This led fifteenth century iconographer, Andrei Rublev, to create one of the most beautiful icons of the Holy Trinity—basing his depiction of the Trinity on his meditation on this chapter from Genesis. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures we hear God spoken of as the mystery that is *beyond* all human understanding; and as the mystery that is *among* us—Emmanu-el—God with us; and as the same mystery that is *within* us—beyond us, among us, and within us—yet all the one and same mystery. These triune ways of speaking about the One God have their foundation in real experiences of this God—One in Three, Three in One.<sup>ii</sup> And all this can be said without "Christianizing" the Hebrew Scriptures, and without running to the New Testament.

Now once we arrive at the New Testament, we see that the experience of God *beyond us* is still there, while the experience of God *among us* takes on flesh and blood reality in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. And, the experience of God *within us* continues from the Hebrew Scriptures, only now with the Spirit of the Risen Christ acting within—bringing into play a new degree of intimacy of God-with-us. Calling this triune experience "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" the early Church developed this further. But even in our gospel today—just as Nicodemus needed to not take so literally Jesus' comments about being

“born again” (or rather, “born anew” or “born from above”)—so, also, with the language of three “persons,” the early church was not literally speaking of three distinct individual persons, but rather, it was borrowing from the ancient Greek theater. In the theater, an actor would walk on stage and play a role, wearing a mask representing that role. Then he or she would go offstage and then re-emerge onstage playing a different role and wearing a different mask representing that new role. The mask was called, in Greek, *prosopon* which translated into Latin as *persona*—from which we get our word “person.” One actor, different roles, as it were, different personae.

So, trying to capture in human language the God who creates and who redeems and who sustains and inspires, shows how limited our language really is, but also how God, who is One, relates to us in so many ways. I remember as a young child being at the beach in Okinawa where my family lived at the time. I used to love to dig in the sand (and my mother would tell you that I also liked to eat pieces of coral lying around). I recall digging deep holes in the sand, and then taking a few steps to the edge of the ocean, and pretending I could empty the ocean by taking water into my bucket and pouring it into the hole I had dug on the beach. Of course, what happened was that nothing whatsoever happened to the vast ocean, and the water I had emptied into the hole in the sand soaked in and disappeared. Well, trying to speak about, and comprehend, God, especially a Triune God—Three in One, One in Three—is like being a small child with a bucket in front of a vast ocean. How can we give expression to that which knows no bounds? The fact is, we cannot speak *about* God in unity or trinity until we learn to speak *to* God—until we begin to experience a relationship with this awe-some, boundless yet most intimate, Reality. The Trinity is best known in real encounters. It only requires of us to stop, look and listen in order to recognize God in such encounters—the One who, because of our rush of impatience, or our self-absorbed spiritual blindness or deafness, often remains hidden in plain sight.<sup>iii</sup>

As I said, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity began first as an experience, a relationship.<sup>iv</sup> A little Hasidic tale provides an illustration of this experiential and relational God:

“When Rabbi Menachem Mendel was a small child, his grandfather Rabbi Shneur Zalman held him on his lap and asked the child, ‘where is zeide [which means grandfather]?’ The child touched the grandfather’s nose. ‘No,’ the rabbi said, ‘that is zeide’s nose. But where is zeide?’ The child touched the grandfather’s beard. ‘No, that is zeide’s beard. But where is zeide?’ The child descended, went to the next room and shouted, ‘Zeide!’ and Rabbi Shneur Zalman went into the room. Gleefully the child pointed, ‘There is zeide!’ The message is a powerful one. Zeide is the one who responds when called. We know that G-d is our Father. He responds.”<sup>v</sup>

God is the One who responds, and in a three-fold way.<sup>vi</sup> The very complicated and much-maligned doctrine of the Trinity is thus based on the experiential assertion, as Frederick Buechner put it, “that, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, there is only one God;” and that God desires to be in relationship with us continually.<sup>vii</sup> Buechner continues,

“Father, Son, and Holy Spirit mean that the mystery beyond us, among us, and the mystery within us are all the same mystery. Thus the Trinity is a way of saying something about us and the way we experience God. The Trinity is also a way of saying something about God and the way he is within himself, i.e., God does not need the creation in order to have something to love because within Himself love happens. (In other words, [for those of you who remember your English grammar] the Love God is is Love not as a noun but as a verb. The verb is reflexive as well as transitive.)”<sup>viii</sup>

And so, the *unknowable* mystery of the Creator/Father *beyond* us, the *well known* mystery of the Redeemer/Son *around* us, and the *infinitely knowable* mystery of the Sustainer/Holy Spirit *within* us—are all the *One and Same* Mystery.

Finally, although we don’t face-to-face encounters with Jesus in the flesh, in which to encounter God, as did Nicodemus—and nor do many of us have direct mystical encounters with the Triune Godhead, as did Isaiah—nonetheless, we do have our church, our workplaces, our homes, and our community and one another, and this amazing world, where we can stop, look, listen, and encounter the Holy Trinity who is as distant as the furthest galaxy, and yet, is as close as our very breath, (and often hidden in plain sight).<sup>ix</sup> May we seek and find the One God who invites us into human community and who comes to us and responds to us already as divine community. In other words, God practices what God preaches, and empowers us to do the same. And so, may “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all evermore.”<sup>x</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> As one observer put it,

“As far back as the Pythagoreans—500 B.C.E.—One was thought of not as a numeral but as a philosophical idea: as the unity from which all things arise...Very early on, One became an image for divine unity...The sacred One has been named variously Tao or the Great Monad (in China), The Single One (by the Mayans), Brahman (in Hinduism), God (in Christianity), The Most High (in Judaism), The One God (in Islam). The aim of the mystic is to become one with this divine whole [and the purpose of God is interpreted as being in union and communion—being one with us]...In materialistic cultures of today, One suggests the individual, the first, the most powerful or successful or richest or most beautiful, the winner [as in the popular mantra, ‘we’re Number 1!'] Psychologically, the experience of oneness is a natural state before the child becomes aware that he or she is an individual. Feelings and fantasies may appear at first as belonging to other people...as much as to oneself. Such experiences of fusion are lost with increasing age and awareness, with the necessity to develop a clear sense of self and individuality [totalitarian states nonetheless try to suppress this]. Yet the sense of the deeper connectedness of all things, that ‘the multiplicity of the empirical world rests on an underlying unity,’ can return in maturity when it may be sensed that male and female, spirit and body, inner and outer, consciousness and the unconscious, the individual and others, the I and the Thou, are One” (Quoted in “One” in The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism, Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin, eds., The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images (Cologne, Germany: TASCHEN, 2010), p. 710).

<sup>ii</sup> Without “Christianizing” the Hebrew Scriptures—the Old Testament—you can “see” the Trinity in every page as they speak of Creator and of Word, and of Spirit; and sometimes Wisdom comes into play as a double of the Word or Spirit. Also in the Hebrew Scriptures we hear God spoken of as *Padah*—the “strong arm;” and as *Kipper*—the atoning sacrifice, or suffering servant; and as *Goel*—the Advocate.

<sup>iii</sup> It's kind of like the way we experience our beautiful stained glass windows. When you look at these windows from outside they are not at all remarkable, but rather dark, impenetrable hunks of glass. But once we step inside what a world of colors we see. The mystery of the Triune God which we celebrate today has something similar about it. This mystery can become a cold, abstract and impenetrable doctrine instead of the glowing, colorful center of our lives. Therefore, we must approach this immense mystery of God—Three in One, One in Three—through God's own Spirit who lets us in from the outside. As the saying goes, "By God alone is God known."

<sup>iv</sup> The Creation stories describe a God who wants company. The God of the patriarchs and matriarchs—the Holy One of Israel—was known primarily as relational God: the One who responds; the One who creates; the One who calls; the One who remains faithful; the One who liberates; the One who initiates the Covenant and restores it time and again; the One who gives the Law; the One who judges and corrects out of love; the One who Promises and keeps those promises.

<sup>v</sup> Quoted in Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, The Spirituality of Imperfection (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), p. 221.

<sup>vi</sup> Let's consider the story of Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-15). The place where Moses met God squarely, and discovered his real self and real calling, was at the scene of a burning bush by Mount Horeb. Yet the psychological, spiritual and societal *place* for Moses to have had this encounter was one of great turmoil and questioning. Moses' fellow Israelites were in bondage under Egyptian slave masters and were in misery. Moses himself was in exile for having rescued a fellow Israelite from an Egyptian which resulted in the Egyptian's death. The need to be reunited with his people and to be involved with their plight weighed heavy on him. He had questions that were *burning* in his heart, questions which concerned his whole being. What am I doing here tending sheep when my people are held in slavery? Who am I that God would want me as a part of God's liberating purpose—aren't I actually just an outlaw, an exile from the once-privileged household of the Pharaoh, now a known killer, a mere shepherd now? Or maybe I *am* the one to lead my people out of slavery—yes! But wait a minute—I can hardly speak in public!—how could I ever pull off something like that?

Rabbis such as Lawrence Kushner comment that, Moses standing before the burning bush was basically facing a simple test. You see, it takes longer than a casual or quick glance at a burning object to see that it is or is not being consumed by fire, so God wanted to find out whether or not Moses could be patient enough and pay attention to something for more than a brief moment. When Moses did, *then* God spoke. That became the opportunity for God to intrude on Moses' wish for a private life as a shepherd. The call then came for him to come to his real self—a man of compassion, one with a role of public responsibility to be with his people held captive in Egypt.

The trick is to pay attention to what is going on around you long enough to behold the miracle of God calling you to your real self, without missing this by dashing to the next thing, checking the next phone message, responding to the last e-mail. There is another world—God's world—the most real of worlds—right here within this busy and distracted one, which we can encounter *when* we pay enough attention. Moses came to his real self, his true calling—and it began with sustained attention directed toward both a burning bush *and* the questions that were burning in his heart. [Lawrence Kushner, "Breathing the Name of God" in Eyes Remade for Wonder (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998), p. 144. See also Lawrence Kushner, The Book of Words, (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993), p. 27].

In the account from Exodus, Moses encounters the mystery beyond him—the unimaginable, almighty, unknowable God who eventually shares with Moses God's mysterious name, Yahweh, which, as the rabbis explain, is pronounced by breathing—Yahhh (breathe in)-wayyy (breathe out). Rabbi Lawrence Kushner explains this name:

"The letters of the Name of God in Hebrew are YOD, HAY, VAV, and HAY. They are frequently mispronounced as "Yahveh." But in truth they are unutterable. Not because of the holiness they evoke, but because they are all vowels and you cannot pronounce all the vowels at once without risking respiratory injury.

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This word is the sound of *breathing*. The holiest Name in the world, the Name of the Creator, is the sound of your own breathing.

That these letters are unpronounceable is no accident. Just as it is no accident that they are also the root letters of the Hebrew verb “to be.” Scholars have suggested that a reasonable translation of the four-letter Name of God might be The One Who Brings Into Being All That Is. So God’s Name is the Name of Existence itself. And, since God is holy, then so is all creation. At the burning bush, Moses asks for God’s Name, but God only replies with Ehyeh-hasher-ehyeh, which is often incorrectly rendered by the static English, ‘I am who I am.’ But in truth the Hebrew may denote the future tense: ‘I will be who I will be.’ Here is a Name (and a God) who is neither completed nor finished. This God is literally not yet.” [Lawrence Kushner, “Breathing the Name of God” in *Eyes Remade for Wonder* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998), p. 144. See also Lawrence Kushner, *The Book of Words*, (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993), p. 27].

Moses also encounters the Divine Mystery among or beside him, in the wind blowing the flames of the burning bush that is not consumed, and in the voice he hears, all of which he correctly perceives as encounter with God. And he encounters the Mystery within him—in his very breath which pronounces God’s name, and in God’s Spirit stirring him to act on God’s call to him to become God’s agent of deliverance to his enslaved people back in Egypt. This *unknowable* Mystery beyond him, this *knowable* Mystery around him, and this *infinitely knowable* Mystery within him – are all the *One and Same* Mystery, the same Breath of God at work.

And so, Moses, having stopped, looked, listened and breathed, encounters God the Creator of the Universe, of the mountain, of the bush and its fire, creator of the holy ground and of his own life and breath—Yahweh. And Moses also encounters God the redeemer who would send Moses forward to be God’s agent of deliverance of the people of Israel out of their bondage of slavery in Egypt. And Moses encounters God the Spirit—the very breath of life, the source of all being—the empowering and sustaining God who would enable Moses to carry out this great Exodus mission. And not only does Moses discover this One God in a three-fold way when he stops, looks, listens and breathes—he also discovers himself as he discerns something deeply directive welling up inside, calling him to a new direction and giving him a sense that he is fitted for this task, with a little help from his friends, Aaron et al.

Much of the same encounter with the Triune God can be discerned in our gospel reading as well, through Nicodemus’ encounter with Jesus—God the Incarnate Redeemer. In this encounter it is important to look at the change going on in Nicodemus. The learned and upright Nicodemus certainly had encountered the Mystery *beyond* him and around him and in him as other faithful Jewish people had for centuries. Here, though, he encounters face to face the Mystery *beside* him, Jesus of Nazareth, God the Redeemer. And now his heart and mind wrestle with the Mystery *within* him, the Spirit that empowers him to be born anew. Something—albeit ambiguous, uncertain and indecisive—is stirring in his own heart and mind; and his relationship with Jesus is not over, as we see when we meet up with him again in the seventh chapter of John. There in that scene, in the temple when Jesus was teaching, his words enthrall some but divide others. Some of the chief priests and Pharisees, backed by the Temple police, want to arrest Jesus, but Nicodemus intervenes as a voice of reason in the midst of the growing chaos saying, “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?” Offering at least a lukewarm defense for Jesus, and a calming presence in the midst of this storm, Nicodemus finds his voice, now in broad daylight. And later, on the afternoon of Jesus’ crucifixion, Nicodemus appears again, in broad daylight, along with another elder, Joseph of Arimathea, to pay his last respects and help give Jesus a proper burial. It was a dangerous thing for Nicodemus to be doing, what with the pressure of his peers, and the Romans on the prowl for Jesus’ known associates. And so, Nicodemus appears at the beginning, middle and end of John’s gospel, and his faith journey progresses each time we encounter him, as he continues to be born anew, again, from above.

<sup>vii</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (London: Collins, 1973), p. 93. And so we experience God as Creator, Redeemer and Life Giver/Sustainer; as unknowable in the One who says “I am who I am,” yet well-known in Jesus, and infinitely knowable through the Holy Spirit; or, as St. Augustine put it, a Lover, the

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Beloved and the Love itself—or, as others have pictured God as Sun with its light and heat, or as God “with two hands” (see writings of Irenaeus), or as the Composer, the Singer and the Song as all one reality and experience; or the phenomenon of ice, water and steam, but *all one thing*. Of course, we also experience God as Divine source of life and loving parent—Father or Mother, if you will;<sup>vii</sup> and as the Son—the one who is “begotten not made,” “conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary,” our close friend and companion, Jesus, who, by spiritual adoption, is our brother; and as the Holy Spirit of Love that binds us to each other and to God, and to our true selves. God is forever calling us into relationship and mission.

<sup>viii</sup> Buechner, *Ibid.*, p. 93. The never-ending mutuality of love within God—that is God at work—has been a part of our Christian spirituality and iconography for over 1700 years, and not just the stuff of systematic theology; and the inner relationship of the Triune God(head) has long been a paradigm for relationships in Christian community, not to mention for the whole human family. Our reading from Canticle 13 (found in The Book of Common Prayer, but which comes from the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Jews (vv.29-34) which is an addition to the book of Daniel, and found in the Apocrypha) can be seen in this light. The song begs to be sung, not explained; but it’s worth pointing out that God is addressed here as the “God of our fathers;” that is, the God of relationships, who is not alone even in the highest “vault of heaven” that the writer can only imagine. Even there God is flanked by cherubim. There is, incidentally, only one throne, not three, for God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

<sup>ix</sup> Oh, just one other experience of a Triune reality—as Buechner concludes:

“If the idea of God as both Three and One seems far-fetched and obfuscating, look in the mirror someday. There is (a) the interior life known only to yourself and those you choose to communicate it to (the Father). There is (b) the visible face which in some measure reflects that inner life (the Son). And there is (c) the invisible power you have in order to communicate that interior life in such a way that others do not merely know *about* it, but know it in the sense of its becoming part of who they are (the Holy Spirit). Yet what you are looking at in the mirror is clearly and indivisibly the one and only You” (Buechner, *Ibid.*, p. 93).

<sup>x</sup> 2 Corinthians 13:14.