

God in Three Persons, Blessed Trinity
Rev. Brian R. Louis, Faith Presbyterian Church, May 26, 2024

John 3:1-17

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. **2** He came to Jesus^[a] by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person.” **3** Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”^[b] **4** Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” **5** Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. **6** What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. **7** Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You^[c] must be born from above.’^[d] **8** The wind^[e] blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” **9** Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” **10** Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

11 “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you^[f] do not receive our testimony. **12** If I have told you about earthly things and you do

not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.^[a] ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.^[b]

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word.

While walking along the sidewalk in front of his church, a minister heard the intoning of a prayer that nearly made his collar wilt. Apparently, his 5-year-old son and his playmates had found a dead robin. Feeling that proper burial should be performed, they had secured a small box and cotton batting, then dug a hole and made ready for the disposal of the deceased. The minister's son was chosen to say the appropriate prayers and with sonorous dignity intoned his version of what he thought his father always said: "Glory be unto the Faaather, and unto the Sonnn, and into the hole he goooes."

Today we observe Trinity Sunday, a celebration and time of praise of the Trinity. Trinity Sunday began to be observed in the Western Christian church in the 10th century and was formally established by Pope John XXII in the 14th Century as the week after Pentecost,¹ the century before the Reformation.

When I think of the Trinity, I think of our opening hymn, “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty,” which is one of my favorites. It is a grand and moving hymn. I remember singing it in church as a boy and I have always loved that hymn. I can still see the priest kissing the altar and walking into the sacristy as the congregation and choir would sing the closing words of the hymn, “God in three persons, blessed trinity.”

The word trinity is not found anywhere in the Bible. However, the formulation of the Trinity is found in the Bible, which is very important in the Presbyterian Church, because we emphasize the importance of the Bible so much and its authority. The names of God the father, the son and the holy spirit are in many places in scripture. The formulation can be found in several passages in the New Testament, including Matthew 28:19, the Great Commission, where Jesus commands his disciples, “Go therefore and make

¹ *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Publishing, 2018), 353.

disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

When all of you were baptized, you were baptized with that formula as well. When your children and grandchildren were baptized, the minister said the same thing. I invoke the Trinity each week when I give the benediction at the end of worship. The benediction I offer is a variation on this passage from 2 Corinthians 13:13 where Paul ends his second letter to the church in Corinth: “¹³ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”

So, we can see that the idea of the Trinity is in scripture and has been around since the time of Jesus. The Trinity is also part of our confessions in the Presbyterian Church, where we profess what some of our basic beliefs are as Christians.

Any time the Trinity comes up, I find myself consulting the *Book of Confessions*. Our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *Book of Confessions* contains a wide variety of documents of belief showing how we have believed over the many centuries of the universal church’s existence, and the Presbyterian Church’s existence.

The Westminster Larger Catechism, written in the 17th Century, explains the Trinity this way: “There be three persons in the Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one true, eternal God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory; although distinguished by their personal properties.”

Distinguished by their personal properties. I like that. (*Book of Confessions*, 7.119)

Distinguished by their personal properties. I’m going to come back to that later because it helps me get my head around the concept of the Trinity. If you have trouble with the Trinity, you are not alone.

Laura Smit, a professor at Calvin University, writes, “Christians have always had difficulty explaining the doctrine of the Trinity. How is it possible for God to be both one and three? Augustine said that if you think you have understood the doctrine of the Trinity, then you are not actually thinking about God. God’s triune nature is another way in which God is radically unlike us.”²

² Laura Smit, “Who is God,” *Conversations with the Confessions*, Joseph D. Small, ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Geneva Press, 2005) 103.

God is certainly radically unlike us. We cannot get our minds around God in general, so why should the Trinity be any different? It is interesting that something so foundational to the Christian church is so mysterious: the Triune God.

God's triune nature is a way for us to experience and grasp some of the great power and glory of God. "We know the Father through Jesus Christ, and only through Jesus Christ. We receive the sustaining power of the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ, and only through Jesus Christ."³

We gain different things from the personal properties of the Trinity. Each person of the Trinity has their own "personal properties," as the Westminster Catechism states.

We all play a role in our lives with our own personal properties. For example, ladies can be loving, caring mothers; responsible, efficient, supervisors who have strong leadership skills; and loving and caring daughters and sisters. We all have "personal properties" that when combined make us unique. There is no one like any of us here. We are radically unlike each other, sort of like, at least in principle, like how God is radically unlike humans, to use Smit's terminology.

³ Smit, 106.

In the Trinity, each person with their own personal properties has a role to play in the one Godhead, the Triune God.

First is God the creator, or God the father. This is God, the vastly creative part of the Trinity. Our Presbyterian Church Brief Statement of Faith says, "In sovereign love God created the world good and makes everyone equally in God's image, male and female, of every race and people, to live as one community."

The role of Jesus is to show each of us the example of how God wishes us to live our lives in service to others. Jesus is God incarnate on Earth with us. God, fully human.

The statement of faith says that Jesus "proclaimed the reign of God: preaching good news to the poor and release to the captives, teaching by word and deed and blessing the children, healing the sick and binding up the brokenhearted, eating with outcasts, forgiving sinners, and calling all to repent and believe the gospel."

And finally, the Holy Spirit. The statement of faith in part says that "We trust in God the Holy Spirit everywhere the giver and renewer of life. The Spirit justifies us by grace

through faith, sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor, and binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, the Church.”

Of course, this is just scratching the surface of what the persons of the Trinity do.

We get power, comfort, inspiration, help, energy, courage, and sustenance from the three persons of the Trinity through their distinct personal properties.

What a blessing it is to have such a dynamic and powerful Triune God. To give thanks to the Creator, God the Father. To thank God the Son for showing us how to live according to the Kingdom of God, and finally, to draw on and be always inspired by the Holy Spirit. May we all give thanks and draw upon the personal properties of our Triune God. Amen.