

Sermon, Trinity Sunday, June 7, 2020, Jane A. Beebe

As a new-ish priest, I have preached my share of sermons on the Trinity. It is traditional to give the postulant, or seminarian, or curate the task of preaching on this day. It can be a headachy business. Yet the readings for this day are anything but dry, theological constructs. We have the story of Creation from Genesis, we have Paul's pastoral blessing, offering the Corinthians God's grace, peace, and communion. In Matthew we have Jesus' beautiful promise that he will be with us to the end of the age. These are all words about God's love for us, God's creative movement, and God's presence. We have a God who is alive, who brings us life. Perhaps the Trinity is the best way to express that aliveness.

Over the last several weeks I have had occasion to make some recordings of songs and liturgy, sometimes for a particular occasion, sometimes just to comfort myself. Several years ago I wrote this in a journal: *There is a kind of Trinity in song: the words, the melody, and the singing itself. One way I imagine the economy of the Trinity is as an ongoing holy conversation among the Three Persons.*

I have created an altar area for myself in the large window in my great room that has evolved over the seasons from Holy Week until now. While I was making the recording for the Pentecost service, I didn't notice at the time the number of

people walking or running by, the cars going up the hill, or the breeze in the trees. It is possible to hear the sounds of all of those things as well. I have decided that I like the serendipity of it. There is life and movement outside my window, calling me to go out the door in whatever way I can. How else might I begin to notice how God moves in the world?

I usually begin my sermons with the words “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” *In the name*. It is tempting to focus on substance only, and not consider the names of things. Perhaps we are fearful of reducing something that cannot be contained. Perhaps by using a formula we end up with something dried-up or uninspiring. Perhaps God is simply ineffable, beyond description. Yet names can be powerful—even holy. In Jewish tradition the name of God is so holy that it is not spoken. When Jesus teaches us to pray he begins, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your Name...”

Invocation is a kind of prayer. The Latin root is *vocare*, to call. When we cry out, “God help me!” or “Jesus, have mercy!” we may be overwhelmed by our need and aware of little else. It is in these moments that we need a name, something concrete to hang onto. When we say the name we affirm that God is already with us, knows our needs, and is capable of acting on our behalf. We place ourselves in God’s hands. One of the strongest instances of prayerful invocation is St. Patrick’s Breastplate (Hymn 370):

“...I bind unto myself today
the strong Name of the Trinity,
by invocation of the same,
the Three in One, and One in Three.
Of whom all nature hath creation,
eternal Father, Spirit, Word:
praise to the Lord of my salvation,
salvation is of Christ the Lord.”

I believe that what we have in the name of the Trinity is the presence of love itself: creative, salvific, active love. And this presence is not in one time or one place or one dimension; it is eternal.

Then there is Jesus’ name, certainly powerful, and one we invoke in prayer and healing. Our Gospel reading today is from the final verses of Matthew. But one writer I consulted urged me to look at the beginning of this Gospel. First we have the genealogy: all those names! Then we have a brief account of the birth of Jesus. “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,

and they shall name him Emmanuel”,
which means, “God is with us.” (Matthew 1:20-23)

Notice that Jesus is named by an angel before he is born. Notice also that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. The meaning of Jesus’ name is indeed powerful: “God saves.” And he is also Emmanuel: “God with us.” What are Jesus’ final words to the disciples on the mountain? “I am with you always...” I am. God is with us. Another mystery. Jesus was born in a particular time and place and yet is with us until the end of the age. And Jesus, the reality of Jesus as Emmanuel, was there from the beginning. This is true because the essence of God is generative: I am. And the essence of God is relational: I am with you.

The name of the Holy Spirit, the presence of the Holy Spirit is hard to pin down. It is like trying to hang on to a balloon that has become unknotted. And yet the Holy Spirit is the stream that flows into all the parched places. It is God’s breath giving us breath. It is our aliveness. The Holy Spirit inspires, transforms, and blesses. When we detect the presence of the Holy Spirit—and it is usually invisible, discernible only from its effects—we know we are on holy ground. It is what makes the Trinity go around. If it truly was that wind blowing on the deep, then we could not have had creation without the Spirit’s presence. The Holy Spirit made Jesus’ conception possible. The Holy Spirit seems to be the connectivity of God, the “witness” of God with us.

So what does the Trinity have to do with us? As usual, Julian of Norwich has beautiful and provocative words to give us an idea. “I saw no difference between God and our substance, but, as it were, all God; and still my understanding accepted that our substance is in God, that is to say that God is God, and our substance is a creature in God... We are enclosed in the Father, and we are enclosed in the Son, and we are enclosed in the Holy Spirit. And the Father is enclosed in us, the Son is enclosed in us, and the Holy Spirit is enclosed in us, almighty, all wisdom and all goodness, one God, one Lord.” (*Showings*, Julian of Norwich, 54)

This idea of being enclosed in God, and God being enclosed in us, seems to really describe what happens to us when we are baptized. We affirm our entering into God’s kingdom, our enclosure. And we are given a name. We have our own names to be sure, but there is a name we share. We are assured of having the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. And within this enclosure there is movement and life, a kind of dance.

There is a beautiful medieval Christmas carol called “Tomorrow Shall Be My Dancing Day.” It is Jesus singing, imagining his sojourn on earth as a dance to which he calls us. This carol may have been part of a medieval mystery play telling of Christ’s birth, life, death, and resurrection. Here are a few of the verses:

“Tomorrow shall be my dancing day;
I would my true love did so chance
To see the legend of my play,
To call my true love to my dance;

Chorus

*Sing, oh! my love, oh! my love, my love, my love,
This have I done for my true love.*

Then was I born of a virgin pure,
Of her I took fleshly substance
Thus was I knit to man's nature
To call my true love to my dance.

Chorus

In a manger laid, and wrapped I was
So very poor, this was my chance
Betwixt an ox and a silly poor ass
To call my true love to my dance.

Chorus

Then afterwards baptized I was;
The Holy Ghost on me did glance,
My Father's voice heard I from above,
To call my true love to my dance.

Chorus

Then down to hell I took my way
For my true love's deliverance,
And rose again on the third day,
Up to my true love and the dance.

Chorus

Then up to heaven I did ascend,
Where now I dwell in sure substance
On the right hand of God, that man
May come unto the general dance.

Chorus

