

God in Human Experience

Trinity Sunday

Text: Ezekiel 37:5-6; Acts 10:38, 44, 48

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Trinity Sunday is the Sunday that follows the celebration of Pentecost, and rather naturally so. Just like in the Apostles' Creed we say, I believe in God. I believe in Jesus Christ. I believe in the Holy Spirit, but there is no mention of the Trinity or the doctrine of the Trinity. So in the early Christian experience there was a Trinitarian experience.

We've just been through the whole cycle of the life of Christ, the great events of Jesus' birth and life and death and resurrection and exaltation. Then the celebration of the coming of the Spirit of God, and then, as a Christian community we worship, we recognize that the God that we worship is the God who is come to us revealed in Jesus and is with us in the power of the Spirit, the one true and eternal God, the creator of all, the source of all and the goal of all. That one true and eternal God is known to us through the lens of Jesus and is experienced by us in the power of the Spirit.

The experience of that early Jesus movement was a Trinitarian experience. It was the experience of God in just that way. There was no thought in that early community that they were leaving the God of Israel. They were not finding another God. They were not turning away from the God of their fathers and mothers and going in a new way. They were worshiping none other than the God of Israel who was the creator of all. They had no consciousness whatsoever that they were moving their allegiance to another. This was the God of Israel. That's why you have throughout the whole of the New Testament scriptures the constant citation from the Hebrew Scriptures. That's why, on the Day of Pentecost itself, Peter stood up and said, "This is that that was spoken by the prophet Job." This is what we've been waiting for." They were conscious of a total continuity with the worship of the God that they had known from their mother's knees, so to speak, and to this present experience of that God revealed in Jesus, present with them in the Spirit. Their experience was a Trinitarian experience.

They had not understood fully, obviously, in the experience with Jesus in the flesh. The Gospels were written decades later, and they were written on the other

side of Easter, reflecting back on their experience with Jesus. But it is obvious they didn't know what was going on. In fact, the disciples come through as rather dull. Now they weren't really dull, but they didn't know. It wasn't obvious. It wasn't self-evident. It was only in retrospect, and then they reached back to the Prophet Isaiah, and they took the name of that one who was promised, Immanuel — God with us. They said, “Jesus was God with us. Jesus was Immanuel.” In retrospect, reflecting on their experience, they said it was as though God was with us in this one. Now the day of Pentecost was a mind boggling, life transforming experience, an ecstatic experience that could not be contained, and they said, “This is God. This is Jesus. What is this?”

And God said, “That's right. It is I. I am with you in the flesh, in Jesus, now with you in the power of the Spirit.” They didn't put all that together in neat formulas or write a creed there. They simply witnessed to an overpowering experience of the one God, the creator of all. “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one.” That was their God. That was the God they were experiencing, the God they had rubbed elbows with in Jesus, and whom they now somehow or other knew to be present in them, a power and a presence that gave them energy and gave them peace, their experience. That early Jesus movement was a Trinitarian experience. First, is the experience, that to which they bore witness, and that witness comes through in the Biblical data.

Let's think about the Biblical data for a moment, starting in the Hebrew Scriptures. As we said last week, the Spirit of God was not inaugurated on Pentecost. Pentecost was a time of the outpouring of the Spirit universally, in a powerful way. Remember, when we baptize a child here we pray to God to breathe through the water to make the water an instrument of grace. And we usually refer to the first verses of the opening chapter of Genesis. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth . . . and it was all void . . . and the wind of God, or the breath of God, blew over the deep.” Remember? And out of that chaos came the creation, the cosmos. It was God breathing, because remember that Hebrew word *Ruah*, we translate “wind,” we translate it “Spirit,” we translate it “breath.” It is the same word, but it points to that energizing creative power of God, to the Spirit of God active in the creation of the heavens and the earth.

Or the Old Testament prophecy that I read, the wonderful story in Ezekiel. Judah is in exile and in Babylon; they don't have a prayer. Their bones are all dried up. Their hope is gone. And God takes the prophet by the nape of the neck and says, “Prophecy to those bones, that valley of dried bones.”

“Do you think, prophet, that those dried bones can live?”

The prophet says, “You know, O God.” God says, “Prophecy. Speak the word.”

And the word comes and those bones begin to come together and there is muscle, and there is flesh, and there is skin, and they stand up. And God says, “Speak

again.” And they are full of life. A standing army as it were. Reborn, by the Spirit of God or by the breath of God, or the wind of God.

And Mary, that young Hebrew girl, overshadowed, we are told, by the breath of God, or the wind of God, or the Spirit of God. And there is a conception, and there is a child born, and of that one the apostles say, “The word was made flesh and dwelt among us.”

And Jesus, on the threshold of his ministry, goes into the wilderness and struggles with who he is and what he is to do and he comes out of that experience full of the power, the Spirit, the breath, the wind of God so that the life of Jesus is exercised in consequence of that breath of God blowing through Jesus. So, the Spirit of God didn’t begin on Pentecost. It’s like the movement we talk about: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, but that’s a kind of Christian prejudice. Actually, if we wanted to be more correct, biblically, we’d say, God, Spirit, Word. Because it was God breathing that brought about the word made flesh.

The story of Peter and Cornelius — it’s a wonderful story. I see it as a model for understanding so much of the New Testament development, and how really we ourselves ought to be doing theology today. Here’s Peter — remember the vision on the rooftop — and the call is to go to Cornelius, the Roman Centurion, a Gentile. Peter struggles a bit, but nonetheless he cannot withstand the power and the compelling force of that vision. So he goes, and Cornelius is there to greet him and Peter gingerly steps inside his house, where he shouldn’t even have been according to his Jewish regulation. Cornelius says he’s had a vision, too, and that it was the angel of the Lord that told him to beckon Peter. So what can Peter do? He scratches his head a bit. He starts out by saying, “God is not partial? Whew! That’s a new one.” Then he begins to tell the story of Jesus.

I think it is so interesting in those verses that we read together that in the 38th verse it tells how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit, and with power. Now notice, it’s God who anoints. Remember, *anoint* is the same word for *Messiah* or for *Christ*. It’s like how God ‘Christed’ Jesus with the Holy Spirit and power. He tells the story of Jesus, and while he’s preaching would you believe it? Pfft — God starts heavy breathing. It’s obvious that the Spirit falls on that congregation.

Now those of you who were here last week (some of you said it was really nice—once in a while. You know, it’s O.K. once in a while), but I’ve got to tell you last week’s worship was probably closer to the first Pentecost than today’s worship. Sure glad that’s over, aren’t you? Sure glad that we’ve moved beyond all that excess, that enthusiasm. I like it domesticated, a nice routine, where you can manage it a bit. I mean, after all, this is a worship of God, and one ought to be respectful and responsible and a little deadpan. One ought not to get involved too much, because if you get too involved, if you really started feeling the Wind of God blowing through you, you’d stand up and start hollering and dancing in the

aisles and singing and shouting. And I wouldn't know what to do with you. (Laughter) And we might not be able to get through this service in an hour (probably won't anyway). (More laughter) I like it calm. Dignified. Don't you? Sure hope God never breathes heavily through this assembly while I'm on the stool.

Well, that's what happened. Peter is preaching along and the Holy Spirit falls and the people start praising God. That's never happened while I was preaching. Thank God! (Laughter) It's so obviously a work of God that Peter says he can't withhold water for baptizing these people. So what does he do? He orders them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Well! They were really messed up. Peter knows this is from God, he sees it as an experience of God, and he invites them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ— Jesus the Christ, Jesus the anointed, Jesus the Messiah, Jesus, the one filled with the Spirit.

That's the kind of data you have in the Scriptures. It's a bit unruly, it's not neat. It's hard to get it into a nice neat formula. It took three hundred twenty-five years before the Church was able to do that. At the Council of Nicaea they finally put together a creedal statement which you can still find in your hymnbook, the *Nicean Creed* which formulated very carefully in philosophical terms what they sensed was happening back there. That formula has come down to us today, so that we still speak of our faith as a Trinitarian Faith. Now the problem is, that when Peter was preaching in Cornelius' house, this was as fresh as the present moment. This was an overpowering experience. They were actually ecstatic, out of their minds in the adoration of God through that overwhelming experience. Then the experience got regularized in a doctrine and put together in a creed. Now people can say the creed and talk about the doctrine, and don't need the experience. Then, because there tends often to be a vacuum of experience – that is, a lack of reality in one's spiritual life – one begins to hang on words and phrases as though the reality is the statement of it, when the statement of it is simply a reflection after the fact. *The story of the Church is a story of outliving its experience, but continuing to reiterate the experience of yesterday.*

Let me give you a couple of examples, and we'll be done. In November of 1993 there was a conference in Minneapolis, St. Paul. It was held under the auspices of the World Council of Churches, which designated 1988 - 1998 as a decade of solidarity with women. It was a response to the feminist concerns for an experience of God that connected with their experience. The Trinitarian formulation—God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit – is, for many women in our day, no longer a kind of formula that speaks to them or that they are able to use in their worship. So the World Council of Church designated a decade of solidarity with women, during which they are sponsoring several events that are in the interest of finding new ways to express the understanding of God, or, simply focusing theological reflection on this question.

Now, that's what the Church should be doing every day, every year, every decade. It should be thinking about its faith so that it is constantly expressing its faith in a way that connects with its experience. When our expression of faith no longer connects with our experience, then we enter into fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is the reiteration of formulas, answers to yesterday's questions, today. The thing that we really long for, all of us, is the expression of our faith that gives witness to our present experience.

Well, this conference was held in November 1993 and a couple of the key players were the United Presbyterian Church and the United Methodist Church. And, oh my goodness, are they in trouble! The poor Presbyterians figure that they will lose 2.5 million dollars by the end of 1995 because of irate people who say that this was some kind of a pagan ritual or festival. The Methodists, they don't know what they're in for yet, but they're in deep, deep trouble. There is a controversy brewing across the country. If you read the newspapers and magazines you'll probably become aware of this. Ninety-nine percent of the pastors who retreat on this on Trinity Sunday would lead their congregations to say, "Isn't that awful."

You happen to be that privileged group of the 1% where I want to say, what they were trying to do is perfectly alright, legitimate, necessary, the kind of thing we ought to be doing all the time, because the last word was not spoken in 325 or 451 AD. We cannot give the finest witness to our present experience of God through formulations that at one time were at white-heat, the expression of the way God was experienced then. I use this as an illustration, not to go into the subject of that re-imagining conference, but to say to you that it is the responsibility of the body of Christ, always, to be finding the freshest, finest way to worship God in terms of our present experience. If we simply reiterate yesterday's formulas and creeds, we are really bearing witness to a hollowness of experience. And what we really need is that fresh taste of God today, that fresh experience of God breathing through us today so that our experience today is interpreted, or is able to be interpreted, in light of our worship of God and our trust in God.

One other example: In our world, as I have been saying to you for a long time, religion is the most dangerous force alive. It is that which is fueling much of the ethnic conflict in the trouble spots around the world. We need to be in dialogue with our Jewish brothers and sisters, and with our Muslim brothers and sisters. And, as a matter of fact, our Jewish folk and Islamic folk are clear: God is one. We should be clear on that too. There is no formulation of the trinity that would claim anything else. And there is no question, as we saw in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Spirit of God is understood in Judaism as the creative, energizing force of God. So, we've got two down. That leaves the understanding of Jesus, and that's why we've been working at it for a year—to understand how in that conversation we can come to a deeper understanding, recognizing what was happening back there and what needs to happen now. No one needs to be worried about that. It is incumbent upon us to do that. Yesterday's answer won't do for today or for tomorrow.

Theology is the constant challenge of the Church to interpret its faith in the light of experience, and experience is ongoing. So, on this Trinity Sunday, I want to say to you it is not enough for us simply to continue to say: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. That's a part of our past. It's a part of our heritage. It gives us a guideline and a beacon light. It is within that context that we continue to think. But, to hold onto it in the light of experience to the contrary, is idolatry, is an act of faithlessness, is a refusal to trust the present Spirit of God to lead us into broader horizons and deeper vistas, more of the glory and the wonder of the one Eternal God whom we see through the lens of Jesus, who we experience in the power of the Spirit. We need to go back to New Testament data, take the raw data, allow all of the past to be that which shapes us and forms us, and then go boldly out into our world with some fresh word.

When was the last time you caught God breathing through you? Friends, it's time to let go and experience the freedom of the children of God who are constantly being led into the future by the God who beckons us, the God who is the source of all, and the goal of all. God blessed forever.