

BORN OF THE SPIRIT
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Trinity Sunday
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Romans 8:12-17

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

John 3:1-17

A man named Nicodemus came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these things that you do apart from the presence of God."

Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again, born from above."

Nicodemus said to Jesus, "But how can anyone be born after growing old? Can someone enter a second time into a mother's womb?"

Which only goes to show that Nicodemus was a literalist as many people are.

Can someone enter a second time into a mother's womb?"

Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Look! The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. Isn't that right? So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

To which Nicodemus replied, "How can these things be?"

And this morning we might ask of the Trinity: *How can that be?* How can God be one yet three? Or, is it three yet one? What does that mean? It's like trying to catch the wind or listening to the sound of one hand clapping.

Is God like water—one substance that can be gas, liquid or solid? Is God like one person just different in different relationships? For instance, I am one person yet different in my relationships as son, father and brother?

God in three persons once meant God in three *personas* or *masks* the way one actor in a Greek play could use masks to play different characters. Somewhere along the line *persona* became *person* and that led the church down a rabbit trail. *God in three persons*. Really? One body with three heads?! Or, one head with three bodies?! YIKES

So here we are with God the Father; God the Son; God the Holy Spirit. Yes, spirit is literally *feminine*. But even with that, taking it literally misses the point. It's like fixating on the glass in the window but not seeing through it. It's like fixating on the finger pointing toward the moon, but never looking past the finger to see the moon.

The Trinity has stumped many. But it has also inspired many, inspired them to love the world and others more boldly and more fully. So let's not toss the traditional icon of the Trinity out just to make things easier on us. Let's take the challenge. Let's ponder the Trinity the way we ponder the sound of one hand clapping.

By the way, if meditating upon the Trinity makes you angry or cantankerous or sick or gives you a chronic headache—STOP. You don't have to stick with it. If meditating upon the Trinity doesn't make you more kind, more compassionate and more loving then give it up and try something else. There's nothing wrong with sticking with Jesus. But for now, I'm sticking with the Trinity.

So—we might ask ourselves—what prompted those early Christians to adopt such a strange idea in the first place? Why not stick with simple monotheism as the Jews and Muslims did? Why not be Unitarian?

In case you didn't know, the doctrine of the Trinity is not mentioned in the Bible. But the raw materials are certainly there, both in the Old and New Testament where God is often portrayed as *beyond, beside and within*. God as Parent, Child, and Spirit. God as Mother, Father, Husband, Wife, Lover, Wind, Rock, Breath, Word, Eagle, Lamb, and Lion. God as light, which is everything and nothing at all. Light is nothing, but by it we see everything else. God is nothing. No thing. As someone said: *A god you can define is no god at all by definition.*

When you think about it, the notion of a Triune God is not something you'd make up out of thin air just to make life complicated and confusing. I'm guessing it was an attempt to represent something illusive, yet real. I'm pretty sure it's more like a scientific discovery than a religious discovery per se. You see, before there were scientists, there were poets, prophets, philosophers, and theologians trying to make sense of reality.

Over time humans observe and discover many things. And since it appears that we are mind, body and spirit and yet one—might reality itself be that way too? Not one; not two; but three; yet one.

The Trinity could simply be a model of reality not unlike that model we all think of as the atom. We've all seen that picture of a nucleus with electrons in orbit. But that is not what a real atom is. Nor is the DNA double helix what DNA actually is.

Still, the models help us understand the imponderable, the imperceptible just a wee bit better. Those models are no more atoms or DNA than Father, Son and Holy Spirit is God. You can redesign and re-label the models all you want but the reality of atoms and DNA would not change.

The Trinity could be mother, daughter, and womb; or parent, child, and family; or breath, word, and applause. But it wouldn't change the insight or discovery that reality is fundamentally a relationship of love within community—a community characterized by equality, not hierarchy. The Holy Spirit in this triad may, just may, represent the Whole, the ecology of cooperation in which all things thrive and without which all would die.

We are children of the spirit whether we know it or not. To be born of the spirit is to be born out of community and into community, the Great Web of Life.

In the beginning was the Big Bang, or maybe it was the First Breath or First Word. But whether it was the Big Bang, the First Word, or First Breath what poured out is an endless passion for creativity, serendipity, diversity, fecundity, and community. One thing merges with another, begets another that merges with another that begets another and another, always to the applause of a throbbing, ever expanding community, which I take to mean, the Spirit. In this world diversity abounds but so does community.

We can't explain the Trinity. But we can experience it. And with experience comes understanding.

And so we meditate on this mystery the way a Buddhist meditates on the sound of one hand clapping. The mind can't grasp it, but the heart may.

In the 14th century, Julian of Norwich meditated on the Trinity. And she's the inspiration for the hymn we now sing.

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HYMN 7

Mothering God, you gave me birth
in the bright morning of this world.
Creator, source of every breath,
you are my rain, my wind, my sun.

Mothering Christ, you took my form,
offering me your food of light,
grain of life, and grape of love.
your very body for my peace.

Mothering Spirit, nurturing one,
in arms of patience hold me close,
so that in faith I root and grow
until I flower, until I know.