"Surprise!"

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Trinity Sunday

I've got some math problems for you. One plus one equals what? (Two.) One plus one plus one plus one equals what? (Four.) One plus one plus one equals what? (Not three. One.) *Surprise!* You see, in Christianity, we believe in a God who exists in three distinct "persons" that all share one essential substance or nature: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. These are different and yet the same. This is hard for a lot of people to wrap their heads around. That's okay. You don't have to understand it in all its complexity. It is what we call a *mystery*. I want to walk through these three different "persons" of God this morning. Think of it as three different ways in which we *experience* God.

There is, first, *God the Father*. Be careful with the word "Father." God does not have a gender, and all of us – men *and women* – are created in God's image. That means God looks like a woman just as much – or as little! – as God looks like a man. The term "Father" describes the kind of *relationship* we have with God – although we have to be careful here as well. It is Father's Day, and many of us can be thankful for the father *we* have or had, but there are others who never knew their father, or who were abused by their father, or who were abandoned by their father. Calling God "Father" doesn't mean that God is like our earthly fathers; rather, it means that God is the *model* for what fatherhood should look like. It expresses the reality that we are *children* of God, and that we have a *relationship* with God.

God the Father has various attributes. God is "Almighty," meaning that God's power is *limitless*. God is "creator of heaven and earth," or, as the Nicene Creed puts it, "maker of heaven and earth, of *all that is, seen and unseen*," meaning that there is *nothing* in this universe that does not ultimately come from God – from subatomic particles to superclusters of galaxies. There are about 8.7 million different species of life on earth. God created all of them. Our human bodies contain about 78 organs, 206 bones, 650 muscles, and *trillions* of individual cells. Almighty God created all of that in each of us.

There are two definitions of God that I find particularly helpful. Both were developed by English theologians in the 1600's. In answer to the question "What is God," the Westminster Shorter Catechism says, "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." The Westminster Larger Catechism similarly says that "God is a Spirit, in and of himself infinite in being, glory, blessedness, and perfection; all-sufficient, eternal, unchangeable, incomprehensible, everywhere present, almighty; knowing all things, most wise, most holy, most just, most merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth." If you look up those documents in our *Book of Confessions*, you will find a long list of footnotes which refer you to specific verses throughout scripture that support each one of those assertions about God.

How do we *experience* this God? In a variety of different ways. Many people experience God in nature – on a mountain, in the woods, on the water. The sunrise, and sunset. Simply watching the

clouds float overhead. Observing the stars and planets. Or in various forms of human creativity – art, music, poetry, literature. Or in the sciences – geology, astronomy, biology, physics, chemistry. Or watching a baby being born. Anytime you behold some aspect of *creation*, you are experiencing *God*.

The second person of the Trinity is, of course, Jesus Christ. The classic creeds of the church emphasize four things: first, his *identity* – "God's only Son, our Lord"; second, his *origins* – "eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father … he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human"; third, his *death* and *resurrection* – "he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried; on the third day he rose again"; and fourth, his *ascension*, *reign*, and eventual *return* – "he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end." The classic creeds skip over everything between Jesus's birth and death, but more recent creeds cover that gap. Our Presbyterian *Brief Statement of Faith* says: "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." That is an *excellent* summary of everything Jesus does during his time on earth. These creeds, which are drawn carefully from our scriptures, are all useful.

How do we *experience* Jesus? Through the scriptures, of course, but also *outside* the scriptures. Matthew 25 says that we encounter Jesus in the face of every person who is hungry, every person who is thirsty, every stranger, everyone who lacks clothing, everyone who is sick, and everyone in prison. So we can find reflections of Jesus everywhere we go. Many people also have powerful experiences of Jesus in *prayer*; some people experience him in remarkable *visions*. Don't limit yourself to thinking that Jesus can *only* be found in the scriptures. Jesus is with us *everywhere*. Jesus is with us *here* and *now*.

The third person of the Trinity is the Holy Spirit. This is where, for many people, things get a little more confusing. In the church I grew up in, I heard about "the Holy Ghost," which I interpreted to be some sort of Casper the Friendly Ghost, maybe with a halo. I didn't really understand what we mean by "the Holy Spirit" until many years later. The Apostles' Creed doesn't describe the Holy Spirit at all. The Nicene Creed tries: "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets." Some of that is probably perplexing to you; you may be wondering, for example, what does it mean that the Holy Spirit "proceeds" from the Father and the Son? There's an answer to that; it has to do with debates among Christian theologians in the fourth century about the precise nature of the Holy Spirit and how it is related to both God and Jesus; but we're not going to explore all that today. Let's instead start with that last line: "who has spoken through the prophets." The Holy Spirit is that aspect of God which actively *speaks* to us. In the Old Testament there are a series of books by people called "prophets." Being a "prophet" doesn't necessarily mean that you are predicting the future; being a "prophet" simply means that you have been called by God to deliver a particular message to a particular people. Often, that message *surprises* them in some way. Jewish tradition says there were 55 prophets in all, 48 men and seven women. All of them performed a similar function: bringing the Word of God to the people of God, who sometimes – often! – didn't want to listen to the message the prophets were bringing. Their messages were often challenging to people who were too comfortable. Challenging to the status quo. *Disruptive*. Calling people to a greater degree of faithfulness to God.

Before I go further, I should mention two things related to the Holy Spirit that I'm not going to cover in depth today: first, the *fruit* of the Holy Spirit – a set of nine virtues that every Christian is called to cultivate, namely, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23); and second, the *gifts* of the Holy Spirit – those unique talents, skills, and abilities that each of us have. Some people, for example, have the gift of *music*; other people have the gift of *hospitality*. There are about thirty different gifts of the Holy Spirit mentioned in the Bible.

Let's focus our attention on an aspect of the Holy Spirit that we experience in our daily lives: the Holy Spirit *speaking into our hearts*. This is, as Jesus put it, the "Spirit of truth" guiding us "into all the truth." (John 16:13) It's the *nudge* we get to *do something different*. A sudden *feeling* that you need to *step up your game*. To embark upon a new course of study, or to begin some new kind of service, or to stop behaving a certain way, or to face the reality that you absolutely *must* get your addiction under control, or that you need to get out of an abusive relationship, or any number of things. You get a *nudge*. Maybe it's an idea that seems to come out of nowhere. Maybe it's triggered by something someone says to you in a casual conversation, or something you hear in a podcast, or (imagine!) in a sermon. You get some kind of *nudge*, and you know that it *rings true*. Often we are stubborn, and we don't want to hear that nudge, and so we quickly dismiss it … but if it's from God, it will come back again. This is the tricky part, figuring out what messages actually come from *God*. Some messages we hear might be coming from our own *ego*. Some messages might come from what we *think* other people *want*. Some messages might come from things that were imprinted deeply within us when we were very young. You have to develop the ability to sift those out. You need to develop the ability to discern the voice of the *Spirit*.

From my own experience, I can say that the most important messages I need to listen to are typically the ones I *don't* want to hear. The ones that take me *way* out of my comfort zone. An example: when I heard God calling me to become a pastor, I did not just pick up and *go*. I *fought*, tooth and nail, for *years*. I kept saying, "God, I will do anything you want, *except* become a pastor." It was an intense argument between me and God, that lasted a *long* time, until, after a couple significant events in my life, I finally said, "Okay, God, you win." I quickly finished up the ordination process, sent out my profile, and here I am, twenty-two years later, still doing a job that, earlier in my life, I *absolutely refused* to do.

Surprise! That's what the Holy Spirit does. It *surprises* us. It calls us to do something *new*. To open ourselves to new possibilities. It happens in the lives of individual people; it also happens in the life of the whole church. Here in our tradition, the Holy Spirit *surprised* us when we discerned that God was calling us to ordain women as Deacons, Elders, and ministers of Word and Sacrament. Recently, the Holy Spirit surprised us again when we discerned that God was calling us to allow clergy to perform same-sex weddings and to allow LGBTQ+ Presbyterians to become ordained officers in the church and to serve as pastors. Not everyone was on board when we began ordaining women, and not everyone has been on board with these more recent changes; both times, the church split apart. Every church split throughout history resulted from Christians discerning the voice of the Holy Spirit, and being *surprised*.

This Holy Spirit of God *continues* to speak, *now*, today, in the very real practicalities of our life here in the twenty-first century. We need to continue to *listen*. And allow ourselves to be *surprised*.

One God, three persons. Father, Son, Holy Spirit. One plus one plus one equals … *One*.

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