

Holy Trinity C 2025 Psalm 8

When I was in high school I took a half credit class in anthropology. For our final project, in small groups we invented a culture and then drew symbols and scenes depicting the defining characteristics of our fictional society on plaster. Those plaster illustrations were broken up and buried in foam packing peanuts for the other groups to excavate and piece together. Then they had to figure out what the artifacts represented and describe the imaginary culture. Even with deliberate clues, we amateur anthropologists didn't quite guess what the creators were going for. It made me think of how we ended up with the doctrine of the Trinity.

Although our festivals generally celebrate scriptural events, we can't do that with Holy Trinity Sunday, because depending on how you look at it, the Trinity is either found nowhere or everywhere in scripture. The word itself is not in the Bible, but the God whom we describe as Trinity—one God, yet three persons—is on every page. In a few places we see all three persons of the Trinity together, such as when the voice speaks and the dove descends at Jesus' baptism; in the Great Commission, when Jesus tells the disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; or when Jesus speaks about the Father and promises to send the Spirit, as he does in our gospel reading for today. When we ask the question, *Who is the God of scripture?* we find stories of a god who creates by speaking and by forming the earth by hand, a god who communicates through burning bushes, wrestling angels, plagues and pillars of cloud and fire, a god who becomes human in the birth of Jesus, a god who raises the dead, a god whose wisdom rejoices in creation and in creatures, and whose breath animates every living thing.

On Pentecost we heard about the Spirit enabling the apostles to speak and be understood in the languages of all nations so that the gospel message could spread throughout the whole earth. It did, but that meant that soon there were Christian communities not just in Jerusalem but also in Europe, Asia, and Africa, and since distance, language, and a lack of modern technology kept them somewhat isolated from each other, the beliefs and practices that developed in some churches differed from what developed in others. As the centuries rolled on and geographically unique theologies persisted, the leaders in those different regions decided they had better come together and more clearly define the religion. They decided which books to include in the canon of the New Testament, and they wrote the creeds to clarify what we do and don't believe about God, creeds that are Trinitarian in form: *We believe in one God, the Father Almighty... We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God... We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life...*

We are so used to this orderly declaration, it's easy to forget that it arose amongst strong disagreement, and the theology-by-committee that we have now represents the interpretation of scripture by the winners—as history always does. We like to remember Saint Nicholas as the gift-giving patron saint of children, but there is an apocryphal story of him punching heretics at the

Council of Nicaea when they were arguing over the Trinitarian nature of God. Through the study and struggle of those early theologians, we ended up with *Trinity* as a way to talk about the one God who is subtly implied and vividly revealed in so many different ways throughout scripture. I understand why the church fathers wanted Christianity to have a clear, consistent, unified doctrine; it's for the same reason you hear me periodically denouncing the heresy of Christian nationalism: people are misled when we label something "Christian" that explicitly rejects the Christ of the biblical witness. So we call God the Holy Trinity...*now what?*

God gifted us with scripture so that the Divine would not remain *completely* shrouded in mystery, though as St. Augustine said, if we think we understand God, it is not God. But God didn't inspire the writing of scripture just so that we could use it to construct theological doctrines; God could have given us a text book if that was the goal. Scripture is an introduction, God making our acquaintance so that we can be in relationship, as God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is already in relationship, even within themselves. Psalm 8 invites us to find our place relative to God: *What are mere mortals that you should be mindful of them? Human beings that you should care for them? Yet you have made them little less than divine...* We humans are a crowning achievement of God's vast and spectacular creation. Our place, just a little less than divine and having been made caretakers over the other works of God's hands, puts us right in the middle of a cosmic community whose job is to praise the Lord. God's *glory is chanted above the heavens, out of the mouths of infants and children...* Infants and children are not going to expound upon the finer points of Trinitarian doctrine, yet they praise the glory of God. Whatever understanding we glean from the study of scripture, it should lead us to greater and greater praise. We aren't called to define, systematize, or explain God; we are called to praise God: verbally, in worship, and practically, living according to the teaching and example of God who is revealed to us in scripture. We can't fully understand God, but we can stand in awe of the one who made us, loves us, and sustains us. Even infants and the creepy crawling things at the bottom of the ocean know that.

Watching an old episode of *ER* the other day, I heard a doctor say he *appreciated* a symptom in a patient. In medical terms, *appreciate* means to *notice* or *identify* something as part of an exam, but it sounded funny to me considering the way we usually use the word *appreciate*—*to be grateful* for something or someone, *to value, respect, and cherish* them. Although Holy Trinity Sunday might seem like an occasion for that narrow definition of *appreciate*, to identify or describe God in three persons, really today and every day, scripture invites us to *appreciate* the Triune God in terms of that deeper, richer meaning of the word—to give thanks, to treasure, to glorify the God who cannot be contained or constrained by our mere mortal understanding. May our doctrines, dogmas, creeds, and catechisms lead us not to a definition but to devotion, to take our part in the chorus of creation, singing *O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*