

Sermon: Born of Water & Spirit

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven M. Aucella

23 May 2021

Based on **Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17**

We are all only human. There are many things we can never fully understand. Especially things about God, the Holy Spirit, and the Trinity. And yet, Scripture continues to challenge us with these realities and all we can do is work our way through what we read, see, and hear.

The church calls this Trinity Sunday, but the truth is, God, the Spirit, and Jesus Christ are in the Scripture we hear every week, even if they might not be mentioned by name. They're just always present in the story.

The concept of *Trinity* often raises more questions than it answers.

Basically, Trinity is a Christian doctrine that states that 'God exists as a unity of three distinct *persons*: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each of the persons is distinct from the other yet identical in essence.' So, 'each is fully divine in nature, but each is not the totality of the other persons of the Trinity.' 'The Father is not the same person as the Son, who is not the same person as the Holy Spirit, and who is not the same person as the Father. Each is divine, yet there are not three gods but one God.'¹ Simple.

Most of our readings lately have been about the Holy Spirit working as God's agent, filling in for Jesus who has left this earth and ascended to Heaven, so we'll stick with that for today with the understanding that the Trinity is always in the background.

Today, we'll focus on the Pharisee named Nicodemus.

Nicodemus seems to be someone wavering between true faith and unbelief. He's a Pharisee and they taught the 'old religion' according to the Gospel writers. In their dialogue here, Jesus discredits the religion that Nicodemus represents. But if we follow Nicodemus through John's Gospel, we see how he comes to Jesus in darkness and in secret, how later he defends Jesus (7:45-52), and finally, how he and Joseph of Arimathea carry Jesus' body to the tomb, publicly and in broad daylight (19:38-42). This is highly symbolic. Over time, John implies, Nicodemus gets it and comes to Jesus in faith.

But in today's passage, he had trouble with the idea of being born of the Spirit.

"How can these things be?" he said. We presume Nicodemus would like to someday enter the kingdom of God, but he had no idea what being born of water and Spirit could mean. In that sense, maybe he's just like us.

On the surface, it all seems to be tied in with baptism, which is the act of being born of water. In ancient Jewish ritual, baptism is a cleansing act. It prepared you for your new life. It washed away your past sins. And that's what it meant in Jesus' time.

Then in John's Gospel, John the Baptist testified about Jesus, saying, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend *and remain* is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit' (1:32-33).

In his answer to Nicodemus' question, Jesus implied that the teachers of Israel had lost their way. They couldn't see beyond their rote rituals, thinking that was all God wanted from them, and all they needed to provide.

But what about that Holy Spirit? Where is it? How do I know I'm living by the Spirit? Not everyone hears the voice of the LORD as Isaiah did, or Ezekiel. Not everyone feels the rush of a violent wind, as the apostles did on Pentecost.

Our own religious experiences may not include thunderous voices or the earth shaking at our feet. We might not be sure we've ever had one. For most of us, God seems silent. Should we take this personally? Or should we try harder somehow?

It might help knowing that God dwells in the silence. Our modern world is a noisy place. Some of that noise is useful, of course, like a fire truck's siren to warn the traffic ahead. Or a train whistle to clear the tracks at an intersection. But a lot of noise comes in through our television sets, or now, from our phones. The Daughter wears noise-cancelling headphones when she's trying to get some serious work done. It's no wonder that God has a hard time getting through to us.

But when we are finally ready to listen, when we are or have become quiet, in true silence and waiting, that's when God draws near.

In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul tried to draw his readers into God's family. For centuries, Romans worshipped a veritable universe of gods through an emperor whose self-proclaimed divinity was unchallengeable.

This Spirit of God thing was new and dangerous, so talking about God as Father and Jesus as brother, with the Spirit pulling it all together, offered people a comfortable sense of belonging, and made the whole thing understandable. Speaking of God as an adoptive father helped give his congregation a sense of family too, helping them all relate to one another. All they had ever gotten from the emperor was a tax bill.

Jesus said, “What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.” Flesh and spirit combine to form the self. And while we can say that we have a spirit – *rûah* in Hebrew –we also possess a *nepesh* – a soul. *Rûah* is literally a breath from God, air in motion; it can come in the form of a violent wind or, as Job noted, ‘the spirit of God is in my nostrils’ (Job 27:3b). The Spirit literally gives and sustains life.

What we know about the Spirit comes from Scripture and from the writings of those who study Scripture. There is no one definition in the Bible that says, ‘the Spirit is this.’ The context of each reference determines meaning; put them all together and you can begin to get a sense of the whole.

Many words have been written to try to explain the gift of God present in all of us. In the end, the Spirit may be nothing more than an active power or mood, or it may be a foundational aspect of our lives.

What we call Trinity is just a human doctrine which, like all doctrines, defines a belief that can be held and taught from one generation to the next without becoming overly complicated. Ultimately, we can’t explain the unexplainable, but we can try to put our arms around it in such a way that it all makes sense.

On the other hand, doctrine doesn’t make our personal experiences any less real. A scholar named Eduard Schweizer once claimed that “Long before the Spirit was a theme of doctrine, He was a fact in the experience of the community.”² Doctrines do not define God or what God is up to in the world.

In the end, we are all only human. As God’s children, though, we each carry within us a touch of the divine. And in our baptism, we are all born of water and Spirit, and God’s Spirit is in our every breath. Amen.

* * * * *

¹ <https://carm.org/doctrine-and-theology/what-is-the-trinity/>, accessed 27 May 2021.

² Eduard Schweizer, ‘πνεύμα’ in *TDNT* 6:332-451 (396).