

TRINITY SUNDAY

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The Trail to the Trinity

I was thinking of Trinity, and I came across the image of a wilderness trail, perhaps it was a vision. No, the Trinity is not like a trail, and the trail image was not a symbol of how to understand the mystery of the Trinity. But trails do take us somewhere, and often to discovery. If you desire to gain a grasp of the Holy Trinity, perhaps the vision of a trail, a holy trail, will help get you there.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

This past week as I was reflecting on a message for the weekly parish email and blog, I wondered about those places that were named for the Trinity. The first place or thing that popped into my head were the Trinity Alps. That led me to do a web search for the naming origins. It took a little time, and I found it, but in the meantime I was taken through pictures and commentary provided by conservationists, hiking buffs and the Bureau of Land Management. The email communique has the results, about the claiming of what started as a small moment on a beach in northern California, as "la santisima Trinidad", into a huge piece of wilderness land. At the same time, in my Trinitarian considerations, I was encouraged by another author, to consider how difficult it is to provide an intellectual treatise on what is exactly the Trinity, within a 15 minute sermon. Bishops for generations have been lamenting how many young priests on this very morning were only contributing to the heresies that abound. The author I mentioned posited that the Trinity is not an IT. No we have to see the Trinity as God Himself. So perhaps he said it is, like understanding any relationship, more like a trail through a living land, with a living person. And as soon as we do that we are talking interaction and relationship and love.

So I am presenting that to you this morning. That is, having a desire on your part to want to understand who the Trinity is, and being willing to embark on the trail that gets you there. Perhaps a wilderness, like the Trinity Wilderness area. Certainly, awe-inspiring, taking in the mystery of creation and its beauty.

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However, I also saw in those pictures of the trails through the Trinity Alps, certain areas where due to lack of use and maintenance over many years, places where it was hard to tell where the trail went to. There was an accompanying comment and warning: be prepared. Know how to read a map and a compass when the trail gets invisible. Well, that almost tells you to not go at all!

But it is worth it. And we do have in our possession the Holy Scriptures as our Map to the Trinity, in the sacraments our compass. It is thus so very worth taking the trail to discover and relish in the awesome mystery of the Trinity.

In a magazine article a while back, a forest ranger described the most common question that visitors to his park ask the forest rangers. Many people, he said, come to the park to hike one of the beautiful trails that wander through the forest, trails designed to display the magnificent trees and plants, to let the hikers encounter the array of wildlife in the forest, and to take hikers on to hilltops for breathtaking views of the countryside. But the most frequent question that visitors ask the forest rangers is not "Where does this trail go?" or "How long does it take to hike it?" or "Do we need bug spray on the trail" but instead "Excuse me, can you tell me where the trail starts?" It makes sense. No matter how lovely or breathtaking a trail may be, if you don't know where the trail starts, you can't hike it.

So, again, here we are at Trinity Sunday, the day when we lift up the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity and proclaim not only that God is one God, God alone...but also that God is in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And after all the illustrations are used and gone, the doctrine of the Trinity is actually like a trail in a deep and mysterious forest called the life of God. If we will walk this trail called Trinity, we will see and experience amazing things; we will discover something of what God is truly like, in all of God's beauty and wildness and splendor.

What we see when we walk this trail in the forest called Trinity is that God is not like what many people think. Some people think of God as like a great big parent, a father or mother in the sky, or maybe a fearsome judge who stares down and makes us behave out of fear and guilt. Some other people think of God like a divine clockmaker who made the creation, wound it up, and lets it tick away on its own. Other people think of God as like some distant star, cold, unblinking, shining out there somewhere, but

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far away from us and our lives. But when we walk the trail called Trinity, we discover that God is not a fearsome judge or a clockmaker or a distant star, but God is rather a *community* of persons--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in a living and dynamic communion of love and self-giving.

Well then, that undermines the "Trinity is only a concept" argument. It is not an "IT"! He is God. And he has a life and he is life within himself....a life in which the persons of the Trinity constantly relate to each other, giving to each other, and loving each other.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves here, because before we can walk this trail called Trinity into the life of God, we need, like the forest ranger says, to know where the trail starts. That by the way is what Nicodemus in our scripture passage today is asking. Nicodemus is a religious leader; but there is sometimes a difference, you know, between being religious, even being a religious leader, and actually knowing God. Nicodemus has a very public commitment to God on the outside; but he wants, as many of us do, something more, something deeper, a relationship with God on the inside. Nicodemus wants to walk the trail into the mysterious forest that is God. So Nicodemus comes to Jesus secretly, under the cover of darkness, to say, "You come from God. Everyone can see that. I want to know God, too; I want to really know God. I feel like I want God in my life. But how do I begin?" In other words, "Where does the trail start?"

What Jesus told Nicodemus was shocking...shocking to Nicodemus and maybe shocking to us, too. Jesus said, "Nicodemus, you don't need God in your life.... You don't need God to come into your life. That's backwards. You need to come into in *God's life*. God doesn't come into your life. It works the other way. God offers us God's own life as a gift and beckons us to enter it. *You* need to be *in* the life of God. In fact, Nicodemus, you need to be born all over again, this time born into God's life."

"I don't know how to do that," said Nicodemus. "I don't know how to be born all over again into the life of God."

And Jesus said, "I know you don't know. Well, there is good news for you, Nicodemus. The life of God is not far away from you. The life of God has come near to you. Indeed, the life of God is sitting right next to you, speaking to you now." The love that binds together Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the passionate love that flows in the divine life, in the relationships of the Trinity, has spilled out into the world in Jesus. God so loved the

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world that God has given God's only Son...given a Son not to condemn the world but to save it...given a Son as a way into the fullness of the life of God.

In other words, Jesus Christ is where the trail starts, the trail that leads us into the joyful and loving life of God. This is the intention of the Incarnation, is it not. As we participate in the Mass, and receive the Holy Sacrament of His Body and Blood, we are receiving His life, and thus the life of the Spirit and of the Father. This becomes one of our primary starting points on the trail that leads to understand the Trinity. Our participation in Holy Communion. Who would have thought that a simple, yet Holy act, as the Great Thanksgiving would be our entrance into the Godhead. But that in fact is the case.

As well, this is why when people choose to follow Jesus and are baptized as new Christians, they are baptized not just in Jesus' name but in the name of the Trinity. To be baptized is not just a ceremony but a rebirth into a new way of life, into God's own life. To be a follower of Jesus is not just to ask "What would Jesus do?" but to be drawn into a communion with the fullness of God's life. Just as a new bride soon realizes that she has not just married a husband but married into his whole family, just so, to belong to Jesus is to belong to his whole family, to be drawn through Jesus the Son into a deep and loving relationship with God the Father in the power of the Spirit.

And this is why the Apostles were so keen on making sure that those who had come to believe, like Nicodemus would, and were baptized correctly if not, but also had hands laid on them for the infilling of the life-giving Spirit, which we personify and participate in through the sacrament of Confirmation.

Back to baptism for a lovely little anecdote. A recently retired Presbyterian pastor wrote in an article that looking back over 48 years of ordained ministry, he remembered one Sunday service in which he was baptizing a two-year-old boy. After the child had been baptized with water, the pastor, using the same formulary Anglicans do, made the sign of the cross on him, put his hand on the little boy's head and addressed him in Trinitarian language. He said, "You are a child of God, sealed by the Spirit in your baptism, and you belong to Jesus Christ forever." Unexpectedly, the little boy looked up and responded, "Uh-oh."

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Well, it was an amusing moment, and people in the congregation smiled, of course, but "it was [also] an appropriate response," wrote the pastor, "... a stunning theological affirmation" from the mouth of this child. And indeed it was. That "uh-oh" was a recognition that everything had changed, that this boy would never be the same. He did not belong any more just to his biological family; he had now been born all over again, this time into God's Trinitarian family. Now he would be called to live out in the world the kind of love and self-giving that goes on among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He was being called in his baptism to live a different way in the world, God's way, a way that is sometimes met with rejection and scorn. No wonder, even at 2 years old, he said, "Uh oh." Life would never be the same. Good.

Every now and then as we walk this trail of entrance into the Holy Trinity, we will catch a glimpse, even in a world of pain and violence, of what being in this loving, self-giving, Trinitarian life of God is like. And thus what God himself is like in his Tri-une being. And what it means for each of us to be the one plus for the Trinity. The ultimate community of love, in which we have been invited to participate. What glory; what depth; what blessedness; what intimacy; what enveloping; what majesty; what awesomeness.

The trinity and you.

God loved the world so much that God gave his only Son, and this Son, Jesus Christ, opens his arms wide to welcome us into the very life of God. The trail into God's own life starts *here*. And it starts at the communion rail. And it starts at the font. And it starts with the laying on of hands. May your eyes and ears and hearts be wide open to follow the trail and experience and know the fullness of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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