

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS**CALL TO WORSHIP:**

Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;

the whole earth is full of his glory!

(Isaiah 6.3)

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty,

who was, who is, and who is coming!

(Revelation 4.8)

Let us worship God.

HYMN: Holy, holy, holy ...

PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:

God the Father — God over and above us — we praise you. You are the ground of being, the beginning and the end.

God the Son — God beside us — we praise you. You have shown us the depths of divine love, and the full potential of human life.

God the Holy Spirit — God around and within us — we praise you. You give us power that enables us to become the people we were meant to be.

God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit: As we begin our time of worship, we confess again that we have fallen short of your expectations of us. We have allowed ourselves to be guided by our self-centered and short-sighted impulses, rather than by the guidance and promptings that come from you. We have allowed ourselves to be shaped by the values of the world around us more than by the principles that you teach us in the scriptures.

We confess, then, that we have sinned. Forgive us, we pray, and help us once again to turn away from sinful attitudes and behaviors, so that we may more fully reflect your goodness.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our Savior; and we pray *together*, now, as he taught us:

THE LORD'S PRAYER

(Matthew 6.9-13, KJV)

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Hear this good news from the scriptures:

God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Jesus,

and, through him, to reconcile all people to himself,

by making peace through his blood,

shed on the cross.

(Colossians 1.19-20)

So, if we have confessed our sin to God sincerely, let us be assured that God will forgive us.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION [*sung*]: Come, Holy Spirit, for, in you ...

SCRIPTURE READINGS:

- **Old Testament Reading:** Isaiah 6.1-8 - Isaiah volunteers to become a prophet
In this reading, Isaiah has an overpowering vision of God in the temple in Jerusalem. The end result of the vision is that Isaiah volunteers to become a prophet — that is, a spokesperson for God.
- **Psalm:** Psalm 29 - “Ascribe to the LORD, you heavenly beings ...”
Psalm 29 is a psalm of praise.
It sees the thunderstorm as a sign of God’s great power.
Notice how the writer keeps repeating the phrase “the voice of the LORD”. Presumably, he’s referring to the thunder itself, which he considers to be the powerful voice of God.
The awe-inspiring display of God’s power ties in with today’s Old Testament reading, in which Isaiah, likewise, is awe-struck by his vision of God.
- **Letter Reading:** Romans 8.12-17 - Led by the Spirit
In the verses leading up to this reading, Paul has been talking about the difference between living “according to the sinful nature” and living “according to the Spirit”.
In this reading, then, Paul teaches that those who follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit are children of God.
- **Gospel Reading:** John 3.1-17 - “Born again / born from above”
This is the story in which a Pharisee named Nicodemus goes to see Jesus, and Jesus talks to him about being “born from above”.
This passage contains the famous verse “John 3.16”.

SERMON: “God in Three Persons”

Today is Trinity Sunday — the Sunday on which we affirm and reflect on one of the most complex and mind-boggling of our Christian beliefs. The doctrine of the Trinity can be expressed in this way: “There is only one God, and this one God exists as one essence in three Persons. The three Persons are God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.” *

The doctrine — or teaching — of the Trinity is the church’s attempt to understand and explain the nature of the God we believe in, worship, and serve. As I point out every year, this doctrine is not found in the Bible; rather, it is an interpretation of what the various books of the Bible say about God.

It’s important to realize that, throughout history, people’s perception and understanding of God has changed and developed, even within the Bible itself. In the oldest parts of the Old Testament, for example, God is understood almost as a tribal warrior God, with a proper name,

“Yahweh”. In the original Hebrew of the Old Testament, God is often referred to as “Yahweh Sabaoth”, which, in the King James Version is translated “the LORD of hosts”, and in many modern English versions as “the LORD Almighty”. The Hebrew word “Sabaoth” means “armies”, referring either to armies of heavenly beings or to the armies of Israel — or perhaps both. This, in fact, is the name for God that’s used in today’s Old Testament reading, when the heavenly beings called “seraphim” call out,

Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh Sabaoth [or “the LORD of armies”];
the whole earth is full of his glory! (Isaiah 6.3)

In this early period of Israel’s history, the Israelites believed in the existence of other gods also, but were commanded, of course, to worship only Yahweh, their own God. This understanding of God is called “henotheism”, which means that, although people believe in *many* gods, they worship only *one* God. This is distinguished from what is called “polytheism”, in which people believe in *and* worship many gods. The ancient Greeks and Romans, for example, were polytheistic.

In practice, though, the ancient *Israelites* were polytheistic, too. In addition to worshipping Yahweh, their own God, they worshiped the gods of neighboring nations as well, including the Canaanite fertility god, Baal. In the period prior to the Babylonian exile, then, Israel’s prophets continually spoke out against Israel’s worship of those other gods, which they called “idolatry”.

In the period following the exile, and into New Testament times, a different understanding of God came into being — the belief that Yahweh, the God of Israel, is the only God there is; and that all other so-called “gods” are no gods at all. This understanding of God is called “monotheism”. Since Yahweh was believed to be the only God there is, it was no longer considered necessary to use his proper name, as if to distinguish him from other gods; and so, increasingly, he came to be referred to simply as “God” or “the Lord”.

The doctrine of the Trinity, then, represents a continuation of this gradually-changing perception and understanding of the nature of God.

The process that resulted in the doctrine of the Trinity was sparked by the person and ministry of Jesus. As a result of his ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension, his followers came to believe that he was the “Son of God”. But what exactly did that mean? Did it mean that he was a regular human being whom God adopted as his Son? Did it mean that he was actually a divine being who only *looked* human? Did it mean that he was both human *and* divine in some way? Where and how did he originate? Had he already existed prior to his birth in Bethlehem? Had there been a time in the past when he did not *yet* exist? Was he equal to God or inferior to God? And so on.

Complicating the question of *Jesus’* relationship to God was the fact that early Christians placed great importance on the person and work of the *Holy Spirit*, also. And so, Christians wondered and debated what the connection was between God, Jesus, *and* the Holy Spirit.

In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit was usually referred to as “the Spirit of Yahweh” or

“the Spirit of God”. The Spirit was viewed essentially as an impersonal force with which God endowed certain individuals, in order to empower them to undertake a particular task — such as governing the people as a king, or serving as God’s spokesperson as a prophet. So, for example, in the story in which Samuel anoints David to be the next king of Israel, the writer says, *Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed [David] in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on, the Spirit of Yahweh came powerfully upon David* (1 Samuel 16.13).

However, in the New Testament, the Holy Spirit came to be seen increasingly as a *person*, and so in the Gospel of John, the *pronoun* that’s used for the Spirit is not “it”, but rather “he”. In the Supper Discourse in John, for example, Jesus says to his disciples, *I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come* (John 16.12-13). That’s six “hes”, and one “his”, all referring to the Holy Spirit. This doesn’t necessarily mean that the Holy Spirit is male as opposed to female, of course; but rather, that the Spirit is a *person* as opposed to a thing.

The question as to what the relationship between God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit is was discussed and debated vigorously for a period of some four hundred years after the time of Jesus. Various opinions were put forward, and various scriptural texts were appealed to in support of each position. One by one, though, various views and opinions were rejected by the leaders of the church, until the view that we now call the doctrine of the Trinity was the only one “left standing”, so to speak. The doctrine thus was arrived at very much by a process of elimination.

An important consideration was the biblical belief that there is only *one* God. This meant that there could be *no* doctrine that said the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three separate Gods.

Again, then, the doctrine of the Trinity states, essentially, that “There is only one God, and this one God exists as one essence in three Persons. The three Persons are God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.” * This means that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit *together* are God, and that God has *always* existed in this form. In other words, there has never been a time when there was no “God the Son” or no “God the Holy Spirit”.

As well, the doctrine teaches that the three Persons of God are equal to each other. *Living Faith*, our church’s official statement of faith says, ... *with the one church universal we believe in one God, eternal Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three in one, one in three, equal in power and glory* (*Living Faith* 1.5).

As I’ve said before, this is a uniquely *Christian* understanding of God. Jews don’t understand God in this way, neither do Muslims, or anyone else; just Christians.

The doctrine of the Trinity thus changed our *vocabulary* about God. “God” and “the LORD” became “God the Father”; “the Son of God” became “God the Son”; and “the Holy Spirit” or “the Spirit of God” became “God the Holy Spirit”.

What complicates the whole picture, though, is the fact that the *biblical* language for God has never changed. Out of respect for the integrity of the books of the Bible, biblical terms for God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit were never replaced with Trinitarian terms. So on the one hand, we have *biblical* language for God, such as referring to Jesus as “the Son of God”, and on the other we have *Trinitarian* language, such as referring to Jesus as “God the Son”. Unfortunately, this tends to make the concept of the Trinity more confusing.

So, the doctrine of the Trinity is a lot for us to get our minds around. If we have difficulty comprehending it, we shouldn’t feel bad, though. If nothing else, it reminds us that God is God and we are humans, and that it shouldn’t surprise or frustrate us if we can’t comprehend God completely! On the other hand, it behooves us to *try* to understand the God we believe in, love, and worship to the best of our ability.

One problem that we run into with the doctrine of the Trinity is that people tend to think of God the Father as only the Creator — as if he hasn’t done anything else since the work of creation was completed. In fact, though, God the Father is the driving force behind *all* the events in the Old Testament. He made promises to Abraham; he honored those promises by liberating Abraham’s descendants, the Israelites, from slavery in Egypt; he established a covenant relationship with the Israelites, and gave them the land of Canaan. God the Father also called various individuals to positions of leadership and influence in Israel. In today’s Old Testament reading, for example, he appears to a man named Isaiah, and gives him the task of being a prophet — someone who will serve as his spokesman to the people of Israel; someone who will call the Israelites to turn away from sin, and live more faithfully in his ways.

God the Father also is the driving force behind all the events in the *New* Testament. He sent God the Son — Jesus — into the world, as today’s Gospel reading says; he raised God the Son from the dead; and, *after* Jesus’ resurrection, he sent God the Holy Spirit to Jesus’ disciples and followers.

In today’s Gospel reading, all three Persons of the Trinity are spoken of. In it, we see Jesus — “God the Son” — in his familiar role as teacher, speaking to Nicodemus, a representative of the religious establishment in First-Century Jerusalem. Jesus speaks of the necessity of being re-born as a child of God, which he refers to as being “born from above” and being “born of water and the Spirit”. He speaks of the necessity of recognizing his true identity — in other words, the necessity of “believing in” him — and says that God the Father sent him into the world to save the world, not to condemn it.

Jesus’ use of the expression “born of water and the Spirit” no doubt refers to baptism, in which God the Father gives the Holy Spirit to the person being baptized. In that way, the person is given a new identity as a child of God, and is empowered by the Holy Spirit to live in God’s ways.

This ties in with what Paul says in today’s reading from the Letters, for he also speaks of the work of the Holy Spirit, and of people’s becoming children of God. In the verses leading up to

today's reading, Paul talked about two opposite ways of living — living in accordance with our sinful nature, on the one hand, and living in accordance with the Holy Spirit, on the other. He argued that living in accordance with the Holy Spirit enables people to stop doing things that are wrong, and instead to do things that are good and right. In today's reading, then, he says that *those who are led by the [Holy Spirit] are children of God* (Romans 8.14), for the Spirit brings about our *adoption* as children of God (Romans 8.15).

The picture that's sketched for us in today's readings, then, is one in which the three Persons of God work in cooperation with each other, rather than in competition with each other. As Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, God works to redeem us human beings from the power of evil in the world — not only to save each one individually from the consequences of his or her sin, but also to create a whole community of people who have a special relationship with him — people who are his children, who belong to his family, and who, thus, are brothers and sisters to each other.

Even if we can't comprehend how God can be “three” and “one” at the same time; and even if the difference between biblical language for God and Trinitarian language for God confuses us, let us keep in mind that the God who created us loves us, has reached out to us to draw us into relationship with him, and continually guides and empowers us to live in his ways.

* *Rose Book of Bible Charts, Maps, and Time Lines*, Torrance, Calif.: Rose Publishing, 2005, page 180.

HYMN: Thou whose almighty word ...

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:

Holy, almighty, and loving God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit:

We praise and thank you for making yourself known to us human beings, even though you are beyond our capacity to comprehend fully. We thank you that you have nevertheless reached out to us, to draw us into relationship with you, and to save us from the consequences of our sin. We thank you for coming among us in human form, and offering yourself as the sacrifice that pays for human sin, so that we can be reconciled to you. We thank you for being with us wherever we are, not only to guide us in your ways, but also to give us power to resist our sinful nature, so that we may live in your ways more faithfully.

We thank you as well for the privilege of being part of your people, your family, your church. Continue to guide and empower us to do the works of service that you desire, so that we may be an influence for good in the world, and may testify to both your righteousness and your compassion. Today we pray in particular for projects that provide assistance to Rohingya refugees living in Bangladesh, especially those that receive financial support from PWS&D. May those projects help to meet people's needs, and help to make their lives in refugee camps more bearable.

Hear our prayers for members of our two congregations, our families, and our circles of

friends who are dealing with difficulties and hardships — those dealing with illness or injury, those coping with mental health issues, those experiencing difficulties in their relationships, those dealing with stressful situations at work, those dealing with the challenges of caring for others, and those experiencing difficulties of any other kind. We pray in particular for those whom we now name before you in silence: _____. God of compassion: We pray for your blessing on each one, that they may experience your strength, guidance, encouragement, or healing.

We give thanks for people in positions of authority, who provide leadership in many sectors of our society. Today we pray in particular for political leaders, that they may be led to exert whatever influence they may have on governments that don't respect human rights, to encourage them to change their ways. Give wisdom, courage, and strength also to those who protest government oppression and corruption, we pray; and grant that their efforts may yield positive results.

We continue to pray about the ongoing pandemic, especially here in Manitoba, where the third wave has hit us hard. We thank you for the work of doctors, nurses, therapists, and others who struggle to care for those who have been infected. We realize how stressed, overworked, and fatigued they are, and we pray that you would continue to bless them with strength and stamina each day.

We pray that more and more people may be convinced of the seriousness of the situation, and may abide by the various rules and protocols the government has established.

We give thanks that vaccines have been available for some time, now, and we pray that you would continue to bless the effort to get everyone vaccinated. We thank you for the work of those who produce, transport, and administer the vaccines. We thank you that the vaccines are available to everyone free of charge. We thank you that the vaccines have already been shown to be effective, and we pray that more and more people may take advantage of the opportunity to receive their first and second shots.

We give you thanks also that, in various parts of the country and of the world, numbers of new infections are going down; and we pray for wisdom for public health officials and governments as they make decisions about removing restrictions. Guide them to be prudent, we pray; and guide the public to be patient, so that rates of transmission may be kept low, and so that things don't again get out of hand.

We thank you that you hear our prayers, gracious God, and we offer them up to you in the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

OFFERING

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND DEDICATION:

God the Father, giver of all good things: For our home on earth and for your unfailing grace and love, we give you thanks.

God the Son, our redeemer: For your sacrifice on the cross that pays for our sin and allows us to be reconciled to you, we give you thanks.

God the Holy Spirit, giver of life: For your abiding presence in our lives, and for guiding and strengthening us, we give you thanks.

Triune God: In response to your grace and love, and as part of our service for you, we present to you our offerings. Accept them, we pray, and use them to strengthen the work of your church in the world — both for your glory, and for the blessing of those who may benefit from the work your church does.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

HYMN: Lead us, heav'nly Father, lead us

COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:

Brothers and sisters in Christ:
Go into the week ahead, now,
in peace,
and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,
to continue believing in Jesus
and living in accordance with the Spirit.
And may God bless you:
*May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of the Father,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with you all.*

(2 Corinthians 13.14)