

June 4, 2023 – Matthew 28:16-20

“And the catholic faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance. For the Father is one person, the Son is another, and the Holy Spirit is another. But the Godhead of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is one: the glory equal, the majesty coeternal.”

We just read those words of the Athanasian Creed a few minutes ago. One God, yet three persons. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A doctrine that Jesus himself confesses right here in our Gospel lesson: “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*” So you've all got it, right? You fully and completely understand the Holy Trinity?

Ha! Hardly. I can't understand who God is and neither can you. The Trinity is far beyond our comprehension. We can confess the Trinity. We can say the words. We can try to picture it. But we can't fully grasp the mystery of three in one. We can't get our heads around the essence and relationships involved in our God as the Trinity.

And, honestly, to think that we could is really kind of arrogant. I mean, we don't even understand ourselves. Our own brains. Consciousness, imagination, pattern recognition, problem solving. These are all still a mystery to medical science. And then we think we can understand the nature of the almighty? That's like trying to teach neurology to my goldfish. I could sit at his tank and teach him till we both die of old age, but he's never going to get it. He's a fish. We are not going to understand the Trinity. We are creatures. He is God. We are not.

But we try. Most commonly, we use analogies. Symbols. Illustrations. We try to say that God is like water. Water can be a liquid. It can be frozen as ice. It can be heated to become steam. Yet in each state, it is still H₂O. Still essentially water. Three in one.

Except it's not the same. You can't have ice, steam, and liquid all at the same time. You have either steam or ice or liquid. But the Father is always God; never is there a time he is not God. The Son is always God; never a time he was not. The Holy Spirit is always God; never a time he was not. All three persons are always and fully one God at the same time.

I once saw a children's book that used an apple as a way to describe the Trinity. You have the outer peel, the flesh, and the core at the center. One apple and three parts. Yet, again, the analogy fails. The peel is only part of the apple. The flesh is only part of the apple. The core is only part of the apple. But the Father is completely God all the time. Not just part of God. Not just a third of God. The Son is completely God all the time. The Holy Spirit is completely God all the time.

Do you see what I mean? Our best attempts to grasp the mystery of the Trinity always fall short. The triune God is so far beyond us that we've just barely scratched the surface of who he is. My goldfish doesn't understand how I exist. He just understands that I do. And that's all he'll understand about me. We don't understand how God exists. We just understand that he does.

That he has revealed himself to us as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Three in One. The Trinity. We believe this. We confess this. Even if he is otherwise far beyond our comprehension.

Which could make God feel very far away. Very alien to us. He's so different. So immense. So transcendent. But, thankfully, our triune God is not only beyond us. He is also with us. He tells us as much in the very last promise Jesus gives us in Matthew, the last words of our text: “*Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*” Those words are very special to me. They were my confirmation verse.

But they're special for another reason. Because with that promise, everything changes. God is no longer merely the distant, too-big-to-know God. He's no longer just the triune God who doesn't make any sense. Because we now know him as the God who comes to us. The God who is with us. The God who will always be with us. And this is a revelation that Matthew has been building up to for his entire Gospel account.

Go back to the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, to Matthew 1. An angel appears to Joseph in a dream to tell him he must not divorce Mary, even though she is with child. And even though he knows that child isn't his.

Rather, Joseph is to give the baby a special name: Jesus. For this child will grow up to save his people from their sins. Then the angel reveals to Joseph that with Jesus a prophecy will be fulfilled: “*Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel*’ (which means, *God with us*).”

God in all his power and immensity and transcendence becomes one of us, fully human. The Father sends his Son, conceived by the Holy Spirit, and just like that, the triune God is with us. A tiny baby in his mother's arms.

Now jump ahead thirty years. Jesus appears at the Jordan River. He's baptized by John the Baptist. And once again, the Trinity is made known to us. The Father's voice booms from heaven, “*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.*” The Holy Spirit descends from heaven and lands on Jesus in the form of a dove. He comes to rest on the Son. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, together as three person, in that one moment.

Standing in that water to show that God is standing alongside of us. His sinless life takes on our sinful lives. His righteousness has become our righteousness. His baptism is our baptism. The triune God is with us.

Fast-forward in Matthew's Gospel again. Now it's three years later still, and Jesus hangs on a cross. He is taking on himself anything and everything that would keep us at a distance from our God. He takes our sin. He takes our punishment. He takes our death.

And in a mystery beyond our understanding, Jesus, the Son of God, the inseparable Triune God, somehow experiences the separation and abandonment of God's judgement when he cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” What we deserve, Jesus endures, so that we may never be separated from God ever again.

Until finally, we reach our Gospel lesson again. Jesus rises from the dead on Easter morning. He is victorious over death. He has conquered sin and the grave. He has crushed all the powers of hell. Never again will those evil forces make any claim on him. He is given all authority.

And with that authority he makes us this promise: he will never leave us. The triune God will always be close to us. As the apostle Peter says in his sermon from our Acts reading, “*This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.*”

A promise poured out in Holy Baptism. Baptized into the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus told the apostles to do in our text. When that water poured over me, over you, when those precious words were spoken, we were brought into the eternal presence of the triune God. And the prophecy that was fulfilled in Matthew's Gospel is fulfilled once again in our own lives. The God who is beyond us is now the God who is with us always.

He is with us in Holy Baptism. And he is with us in his Holy Word. That's the other way that Matthew says that Jesus is with us. In the teaching of everything Jesus commanded, Jesus is with us. He is the Word made flesh. And when his word is spoken, when it is taught, when it is sung in our hymns and liturgy, Jesus himself is with us.

And won't ever understand everything there is to understand in God's Word. But there are still wonderful things to be understood. Rules to live by. Promises to embrace. Stories of the love of God to sinners like you and me. As Matthew also tells us, “*Everyone then who hears these words of [Jesus] and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.*” The rock that is Jesus Christ.

God is with us in our Baptism. God is with us in his Word. And with those two great gifts we become his disciples. And we are invited to be in his presence in yet a third way: at his Holy Supper. Where our Lord meets us in his Body and Blood. Where he forgives sins and strengthens faith. Where he unites us as one even as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one. We go and we make disciples of all nations. And then we gather as disciples from every nation before the throne of the Lamb who was slain.

We will not grasp the mystery of the Trinity, but we will confess it. We will not comprehend just how powerful and immense our God is, but we will believe he is always with us. We will not understand how he is three persons yet only one God, but we will hear his Word and learn all that he has done for us. Amen.