

**Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People**  
Trinity Sunday – Year A

**RCL Readings** – Genesis 1:1-2:4a; Psalm 8; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28:16-20

**ACNA Readings** – Genesis 1:1-2:3; Psalm 150; 2 Corinthians 13:5-14; Matthew 28:16-20

**Introduction.** The first Sunday after Pentecost – and before the beginning of the season known as Ordinary time – is Trinity Sunday. It is one of the few Sundays in the church calendar that is devoted to a Christian doctrine and not to an event in the Gospels or a day dedicated to a saint. God is a mystery, and no greater concept of God is more mysterious than the concept of the Trinity. Preaching the Trinity is not rocket science ... *its worse than that!* It is not easy for finite minds to grasp at something infinite let alone put them into words of explanation. The nature of God, the Godhead, his infiniteness, and his mystery humble us as we contemplate the uniqueness of God this Sunday.

**Common Theme.** While the word Trinity is not in the Bible, the mystery of God's nature is. "It is the glory of God to conceal a thing, but the honour of kings to search a thing" (Prov 25:2). Our readings reveal that this mystery began at the very creation of the universe itself. God's mysterious nature requires our honest search and contemplation. Gentile Christianity did not invent the mystery of the Godhead. Let's remember that one of the more profound truths of Judea-Christian theological history is that the founders and early protagonists of the unique unity of God were indeed pious, zealous, monotheistic Jewish people.

**Genesis 1:1-2:3.** The creation narrative is in itself mysterious and poetic. In Hebrew, seven words comprise the opening sentence and they anticipate the pattern for the seven days of the creation. In poetical form, the whole of the creation account is summed up in the very first sentence. The Hebrew grammar contains within it elements of mystery.

The word God (אֱלֹהִים) is a plural object yet the verb attributed to actions by God are in the singular when correct grammar dictates they should be in the plural.<sup>1</sup> Then remarkably at the end of the creation week, the verb usage switches from a singular object (God) to a plural one: "Let us make" (Gen 1:26). The literal text begs all kinds of questions: Who was God consulting with here? Is there some kind of heavenly court to which God can speak, such as the court scene we find in the opening chapters of Job? When did that court of heavenly beings get created?

The text does not explain and this compels us to contemplate the mysteries presented and to interpret them. During the 2nd Temple Period, some Jewish sages took the personification of Wisdom as seen in Proverbs 8 and placed her – wisdom is female in Hebrew – within the divine counsel. 2 Enoch 30:8 – which is a pseudepigraphic Jewish text describing the ascent of Enoch to heaven – says: "And on the sixth day I commanded my wisdom to create man."

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<sup>1</sup> While the verbs attached to God's actions are overwhelmingly in the singular form, there are exceptions. One exception is Genesis 20:13 in which Abraham describes to Abimelech how God caused (plural verb) him to wander through the land of Canaan.

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The mystery is further compounded when, following the creation account, the creator does something very interesting, he rests for a period of time. Why is this mysterious? Because conceptually God exists outside of time, he creates time and yet here he allows himself to become influenced or affected by time. How can time, such as a 24hr day, have any possible bearing on the infinite? And yet the literal text describes the infinite being affected by the finite.

Exodus 31:17 further describes God as not only resting on the Sabbath but also being refreshed. This begs another question: who or what was resting on the Sabbath and how was he refreshed? Finally – and ambiguously – Genesis 2:4 introduces a second name describing God; יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים or *YHWH Elohim* (the Lord God) as being the creator of the heavens and the earth. The creation account poses many unsolved mysteries of the nature of God, how he creates, through whom he creates, and how he can enter his creation to be affected by time. It's these mysteries that we ponder and search out this Trinity Sunday.

**Psalm 8.** David has the creation of the world in mind as he pens this psalm of praise to God. God's name is declared as majestic and is praised as the creator of the earth and not just the maker of man. Although human beings do have a central place in the psalm – being cryptically described as lower than angels yet crowned with glory and honour. David ponders the mysteries of the stars and the heavens, things so out of reach for him and relates this to the nature of God by proclaiming the majestic name of God.

Names are important, as they give us identity and ground us in history, time, and place. Our names can tell other people something about who we are and where we might come from. God has a name and that name is incredibly special, unique, and mysterious. God's name is יְהוָה; its meaning and its pronunciation are elusive. Whole books have been written concerning his name and yet in the end he remains undefinable. David simply concludes: "How majestic is your name in all the earth!"

**2 Corinthians 13:5-14.** Paul's epistles to the Corinthians contain some strong exhortations, rebukes, and chastisement for inappropriate behaviour. In the end, his final greetings written here urge the Corinthians to rejoice, becoming restored in right conduct and right relationships with each other. Greeting each other with a holy kiss might be culturally sensitive for us in the West, however here in the Middle East – and many of the Mediterranean countries – a kiss on the cheek continues as the equivalent of a hearty handshake or friendly slap on the shoulder.

The final Trinitarian benediction of verse 13 is the only time the Trinitarian formula is used in Paul's letters. Why he uses it here and nowhere else is unclear. In the late second Temple period Jewish tradition, the Holy Spirit was spoken of as a force or aspect of God's presence. However, in Paul's blessing, he deliberately equates the Holy Spirit as an equal person of the Godhead.

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**Matthew 28:16-20.** The Trinitarian benediction is continued here in the baptismal formula commanded by the Lord Himself. The final instructions of Jesus are pretty straightforward and uncomplicated. Jesus has given us the task of making disciples. Disciples in Hebrew is the word for student תלמיד *Talmid*. It derives from the verb, to learn.

We are to make students or learners of all nations and teach them to obey the commandments of Jesus. Disciples study the teaching of their master and then seek to put what has been learned into practice. Believing in Jesus is not the end goal of the great commission. Clearly, one part of the goal of the great commission involves carefully following the teachings of the Messiah.

Jewish people used baptism – following circumcision in the case of males – as part of the conversion process for Gentiles who wanted to become Jews. It's no surprise then that baptism is the foundational experience for Christians as well. The Trinitarian formula of baptism stresses the divinity of Jesus, who is placed in the same benediction as the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Baptism in a *name* carries the implicit sense of loyalty to that name. Through baptism, in the name (singular) of the Father, Son, and Spirit (plurality) we acknowledge and declare our loyalty to the mystery of the Trinity.

### ACNA Readings

**Psalms 150.** The final psalm in the prayer book of the Jewish People ends with the powerful imperative: "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!" (Psa 150:6). The word for breath נְשָׁמָה – from the verb to breathe – in Hebrew is also the word for soul. Some translations will read: "Let everything that has a soul praise the Lord!" This could infer all animal life as well; as they too have both a breath and a soul – as it's the same word. What is the connection between the soul and breath?

According to Jewish tradition when Adam ate the fruit in the garden all the world was cursed and everything became corrupt. The only thing not corrupted was the sense of smell.<sup>2</sup> Sight was corrupted because we saw each other's nakedness; taste was corrupted because we ate of the forbidden fruit; touch was corrupted as we now had to toil and labour the earth; hearing was corrupted because now God would not walk and talk with us in the cool of the evening. But the sense of smell was not corrupted.

The rabbis connect the sense of smell with the gateway to the soul. They noted how incense was used in the worship of God and they connected the smell of incense with the prayers of the people. Revelation

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<sup>2</sup> Although the tradition does not tell us how the sense of smell was not corrupted, it is important to note that at the creation of Adam God breathes life into him through his nostrils (Gen 2:7).

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offers the same connection (Rev 8:3-4). Breathing in incense touches the soul of the worshipper who then responds with prayers as incense to God.

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