

# GOD

John 3:1-17

The Holy Trinity (Series B)

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson for the Holy Trinity comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 3, verses 1 through 17. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 3, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>1</sup> Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."

<sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." <sup>4</sup> Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup> That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' <sup>8</sup> The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

<sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? <sup>11</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup> If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup> "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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Who is God? That has to be about the most basic theological question, right? Who is God?

The Christian answer is short and simple: God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That's the short and simple answer. But, as is the case with so much of Christian doctrine, there is a rich mine to explore. This is one of the marvelous aspects of Christian doctrine. There is usually a simple answer that is accessible to all people with little or no background in Christianity. But we naturally want to know more about this great and merciful God. We should want to know more. So there is a deep well in Scripture that we can drink from every day of our lives and never exhaust.

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It's interesting to observe the way Christians describe God compared to how the other religions of the world describe their gods. Other religions typically describe their gods in terms of his attributes. In Islam, for instance, God is almighty. He is powerful and sovereign over all things. In Islam, his power is his primary attribute. And this is fairly common in other western religions. In eastern religions, like Hinduism or Buddhism, god, or the gods, are immanent but impersonal. That is, they are near. There is a mystical connection to them, or the earth, or some spiritual force in the universe, but it's not personal. You don't really know them.

In these other religions, god, or the gods, are usually defined by their attributes. You ask someone from another religion, "Who is god?" and they will probably answer by telling you what he is like. They'll describe his attributes. And the reason they do this is that these gods have not really revealed themselves. When you're searching for a god who has not revealed himself, you can only make deductions or estimations based on what you think he must be like. And the reason, of course, that these gods have not revealed themselves is that they are not real.

Christianity is very different in this respect. Now, we do, as Christians, talk about God's attributes. But our statements about his attributes are based on what God has revealed about himself in the Scriptures. And it's not just a case of God saying, "I am all-powerful, I am all-knowing," etc. But we also know his attributes from what he has revealed about his person and from the works he has performed in the sight of human witnesses. So when someone asks, "Who is God?" there are several ways we can answer that question.

We do this regarding other persons. When someone asks, "Who is so-and-so?" I think there are three basic ways we might answer that question. And you can disagree with me on this. This is not a point of doctrine that there are three and only three ways of introducing a person. Maybe there are seven; I don't know. But I can think of three basic ways we might do this.

First, we can introduce them according to their person. Suppose you're talking with someone after church and you see someone on the other side of the room that you don't recognize. So you ask, "Who's that?" And your friend says, "Oh, that's so-and-so. She's the daughter of so-and-so. She's married to this guy. And they have three children: x, y, and z." You've learned the person's name and who she is related to. This is the kind of answer where we say about God that he is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These are names for the three persons of the Trinity, and it also gives us a glimpse into the relationships of the three persons to one another.

The second way you can introduce a person is by their attributes. This might happen when you hear a name in conversation and you ask, "Who's that?" So your friend says, "He's about 5' 8"; has a thick, red beard; seems kind of quiet at first; but is really funny if you can get him talking." And we can also introduce God according to his attributes. His chief attribute, and this is different from most, if not all, other religions, is that "God is love" (1 John 4:8). He is also glorious, majestic, uncreated, unlimited, eternal, almighty, etc. Most religions of the world describe their gods by stating his attributes. And we do this too, but we also do much more.

The third way you can introduce a person is by their works. This might happen if you ask, for example, "Who is Jackie Robinson?" It's possible that someone would tell you his family relationships or his personality, but it's much more likely that they would introduce him by his works, because that's what he's famous for. In 1947 he broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball. He played ten seasons for the Brooklyn Dodgers, mostly at second base. He hit .311 with a .409 on-base percentage. If you're not a baseball nerd, I can tell you that is really, really good. He won the Rookie of the Year Award, one MVP, and was an all-star six times. In 1962 he was elected to the Hall of Fame. This is usually the way we introduce someone we might not know personally, but who has significant accomplishments.

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So we can also introduce God by listing his works. In short, he created the world and everything in it. He redeemed us through the blood of the Son. And he gathered his Church together where he forgives our sins.

So there are these three ways that we can introduce God: by his persons, by his attributes, and by his works.

And we usually start with his persons. God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is the doctrine of the Trinity. God is three persons in one divine nature. We confessed this in the Athanasian Creed. And the Athanasian Creed is the sort of thing where, if you read it once, you might not grasp the meaning of the thing. That is because the thing it is describing—the Trinity—is mysterious and beyond human comprehension. But if you read through the creed a few times, you will begin to notice that most of it is restating the same simple truth over and over again in a slightly different way. And this simple truth is that there is one God with one divine nature. And there are three persons who share this one divine nature: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. They are equal in every divine attribute. Each of them fully possess the same divine nature. It's not like each person possesses one-third of the divine nature. No. Each one possesses the whole thing. So we do not divide the divine nature up into three parts, nor do we mush the three persons into one. There is one divine nature, and there are three distinct persons. So your homework for this week is to read through the Athanasian Creed, let's say, five more times. And I think you'll start to catch on that it keeps stating the same truth in a slightly different way. You might still have questions. That's okay. You might even have more questions than when you started. You can stop by the office this week; I always like visitors. Or you can bring your questions to church next week, and I'll either answer your question, or I'll say, "I don't know," or I'll say, "Nobody knows," because some questions about the Trinity are like that. It's a mysterious doctrine. No one fully understands it. But we confess it to be true.

And we confess it to be true because Scripture reveals it to us. Sometimes you run into someone who thinks they're really smart and they say, "But the word *Trinity* isn't in the Bible." Yes; we know that. We use the word *Trinity* as a title for this doctrine that Scripture teaches in many places. We confess the doctrine of the Trinity because there are many passages in Scripture that teach there is one God. There are also many passages that speak of the Father as God. There are many passages that speak of the Son, Jesus Christ, as God. And there are many passages that speak of the Holy Spirit as God. And we know that these are not just different ways of speaking of the same person, because we have passages that speak of all three of them as distinct persons. And we have passages where Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, speaks of the Father as a person distinct from himself and the Holy Spirit as a person distinct from himself.

This passage from John 3 is one of those passages. It doesn't teach everything there is to teach about the Trinity, but it teaches some of it. And this passage comes up quite often throughout the lectionary. This is the now eighth time I've preached on it since coming here. It comes up so often because it teaches several different things. The first part gives us a marvelous description of Baptism: being born again of water and the Spirit (3:5). And the second part has this fascinating Old Testament connection where Jesus compares himself to the snake that Moses set on a pole during the Exodus. This foreshadowed his death on the cross, and how he would bear the curse for all humanity, so that everyone who looks to him in faith would live.

But this morning we're doing something different. Instead of digging into the details, we're going to get a broad overview. This is the view from 30,000 feet. Because when we do this, we see the doctrine of the Trinity. In this passage we see all three persons of the Trinity distinguished from one another, and we also see their work.

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First, let's notice the persons of the Trinity. And we'll follow the order in which Jesus mentions them. The first mention is the Holy Spirit. Jesus talks about him in verses 5 through 8. Then in verses 16 and 17 Jesus speaks of the Father, and he identifies himself as the Son of God. **"God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son."** So in this broad overview we see all three persons of the Trinity. First, the Holy Spirit, and then the Father and the Son. And so we learn to distinguish the three members of the Trinity. They are three distinct persons.

We are also introduced to God's primary attribute: love. And this, again, is in that most beautiful and comforting verse: **"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son."** Yes, God is almighty. He is also glorious, majestic, uncreated, unlimited, eternal, and so on. But his primary attribute is love.

And we also see in verse 16 that God's attributes are manifested by his actions, especially his attribute of love. It's not enough to just say you are all these things; you have to prove it. And God proves his attributes to us through his works. Suppose someone says to you, "I am the strongest, smartest, and most loving person you will ever meet." You would say, "Oh, really? I suppose you're the humblest too." You're not going to believe them unless they demonstrate it. Now, I suppose, theoretically, a person can be strong and smart without ever demonstrating it. Those attributes can be there even when they're not in use. It's possible that the world's strongest man works a desk job. But that is not the case with love. If you are loving, you will, necessarily, perform acts of love, because to not perform acts of love would be unloving. This is why the Christian God uniquely has love as his primary attribute. You have to actually exist so that you can do acts of love. You can theoretically have an all-powerful god who just never demonstrates his power. But you cannot have a theoretical god who loves. The God who loves must be real. He has to demonstrate his love among us. Otherwise, he is either not loving, or he is not real. **"But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us"** (Rom. 5:8). **"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son."** This is the primary way that God demonstrated his love for us. And God also demonstrated his power by raising Jesus from the dead. This proved that Jesus truly is the Son of God, just as he claimed to be. It proved that the Son of God died for our sins, and God the Father accepted that sacrifice in our place. In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we see that God really does love us.

This is how we know God. We know him by his works. It's one thing if a prophet just tells us that God told him something. Maybe he's a true prophet of God. But he could also be a liar or a crazy person. But we know God by his works. We know his power and love and wisdom and majesty because he demonstrated all those attributes in Jesus Christ. And it is through these works of Jesus Christ that we also know the Father. It's like Jesus says: **"Whoever has seen me has seen the Father"** (14:9). They share the same divine nature, so we know the Father and the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ, who actually appeared on earth and demonstrated himself.

So there is this third way that we introduce God. We introduce him by his works. And God has many works throughout the history of the world, but for now we'll just consider the work of our salvation. Each person of the Trinity has their own unique work in our salvation. God the Father gave the Son for us. He sent him into the world, and he condemned our sin in the body of his Son. That is the Father's work. God the Son came into the world. He took on our human flesh, he bore our sins in his body, he suffered the condemnation of our sin, and he rose again from the dead. This is the work of the Son. And this is actually one of the reasons why there must be a Trinity. In order for God to both judge all sin and bear all sin at the same time, he must be at least two persons. There must be one person to condemn, and there must be another person to be condemned. It is necessary for our salvation. This is the work of the Father and the Son,

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and we see it in verses 16 and 17. And the work of the Holy Spirit is to take that salvation and apply it to us individually. Here we make a distinction between salvation accomplished and salvation delivered. Our salvation was accomplished at the cross. The Holy Spirit delivers it to us through his Word and Sacraments. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, and we see it in verses 3 through 8. It is the Holy Spirit who works the new birth. That is, he creates faith in our hearts and makes new creatures out of old, dead children of wrath. These are the three distinct works of the Trinity in our salvation: the Father gave the Son; the Son suffered, died, and rose again; and the Holy Spirit delivers that salvation to us here and now.

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This is God. He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is glorious, majestic, uncreated, unlimited, eternal, almighty, and, above all, loving. And he has manifested his love by saving us from our sins. The Father gave his Son. The Son gave his life. And the Holy Spirit delivers this salvation to us. Praise God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.