

Trinity Sunday is always a dangerous day for a preacher. How can you capture in a sermon the tremendous mystery of the Holy Trinity? Because of that, Trinity Sunday often has two nicknames in the church.

One is "Seminarian Sunday." Why should a rector deal with such a difficult topic? Let someone else, an assistant, a seminarian, a deacon preach.

The other is "Heresy Sunday." Any time you try to nail down in human terms the nature of the Trinity, you're likely to slide off the road into one ditch or another.

But I'm going to try a different angle this morning. I'm going to look at an Old Testament text. It's a text full of meaning. The early church used it when they were wrestling and debating about the nature of the Holy Trinity. This text won't capture all of the nuances and complexities of the Trinity. But this text will give us an early window into some aspects of the Trinity. And that text is our Old Testament lesson this morning, Proverbs ch8.

But before we jump to Proverbs, just a word about the Trinity. We know it's a difficult concept. Doesn't sound like good math:

$$1 + 1 + 1 = 1$$

And the Trinity causes great difficulty between Christians and our fellow members of the Abrahamic faiths, the Jews and the Muslims. We all claim to be monotheistic. We all claim that God is one.

Yet we Christians turn around and say that both Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit somehow share the nature and share identity with God the Father, the creator of Earth and Heaven. It sounds suspicious to Jews and Muslims, like we Christians worship 3 gods instead of 1 God.

How do we make sense of it?

Well, when the early Christian theologians were wrestling with all this they combed through the Old Testament, looking for hints about God's Trinitarian nature. There are plenty of Trinitarian statements in the New Testament, even though the word Trinity is not used. But there are hints in the Old Testament as well.

One of the things that these early Christian thinkers were looking for was evidence and suggestions of complexity in the nature of the one God.

They had to look no further than the beginning of the Old Testament. At the end of the Creation story, God says "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness."¹ The pronouns are plural. And there are a number of other times that God uses plural language to speak of himself. Again, this suggested to early Christians that while there is only 1 God, there may be some plural aspects to his one nature.

¹ Genesis 1:26

And, they noted in the beginning of the creation story, the first 3 verses of Genesis point to some complexity. v1 refers to God creating the heavens and the earth. v2 says that the Spirit of God hovered or moved over the face of the deep. And v3 says that God created by speaking the word, "Let there be light." Right there in those 3 verses they noted the presence of God the creator. And yet there was also the Spirit of God moving over the primordial waters. And God creating by speaking his word.

The great Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, would speak extensively about God's word. He treated it almost like a separate being, something that went out from God and did things. Later, the Gospel of John would pick up on Philo's language: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him."²

This Word was somehow part of God, yet separate from God, and yet was part of God's creating the world. So, these early Christians noted, in the first 3 verses of Genesis mention is made of God, and God's Spirit, and God's Word. This to them pointed ahead to the Holy Trinity.

Also, by this time, Jewish rabbis and scholars were looking at other manifestations of God in scripture. Like God's Word, these other attributes also seemed to be attached to God or coming from God in some way. And yet they also seemed separate from God.

They spoke of God's glory. God's glory was a manifestation of his presence. And yet, at other times, God's glory would go forth from God and appear in a specific location—in the Temple, in the Tabernacle, in a Pillar of Cloud and Pillar of Fire. It was of God and from God. And yet it also functioned somewhat separately.

They spoke similarly of God's law, God's truth, God's goodness and lovingkindness, God's mercy. These were all from God. And yet they went out from God and did his work in the world.

Which brings us to our OT lesson from Proverbs. In Proverbs 8 we have another attribute of God: Wisdom.

The book Proverbs is all about living wisely. Proverbs encourages us to reject the ways of Folly and embrace the way of Wisdom.

And chapter 8 talks about Wisdom in personified terms. In fact, much of the beginning of Proverbs is about the need to reject the godless and immoral ways of Madam Folly, and to turn and embrace the ways of Lady Wisdom.

As chapter 8 begins, Lady Wisdom is portrayed as taking her stand at the crossroads and the gates of the city, the most heavily trafficked areas, calling to God's people to live wisely.

² John 1:1-3

Like God's Word, or Glory, or other attributes that go forth from him, Lady Wisdom is also portrayed as almost a separate being from God, and yet also coming from God. And this is said very explicitly in Proverbs 8. Listen to what Wisdom says:

"The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth."³

Let's not miss this. Wisdom says she was created or begotten by God before the creation of anything else. And she goes on and on:

"When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth... When (God) established the heavens, I was there... I was beside him, like a master worker."⁴

In other words, Wisdom says that not only was she brought forth before anything was created, but she also assisted God in creating the world.

So when the early Christians were searching the Hebrew scriptures, this account of God's Wisdom caught their eye. Wisdom was with God in the beginning. Wisdom assisted God in creation. Wisdom was with God and from God, and yet somehow separate from God.

In these passages they saw early echoes of the Christ. And they began to call Jesus the Wisdom of God.

One of the great theologians of the church, Gregory of Nazianzus writes about Christ, "He is Wisdom, the maker of the worlds, who brings all things to fulfilment and recreates all things."⁵

You may remember the famous Advent hymn, "O come, O come, Emmanuel." This ancient hymn uses Old Testament images and titles of Christ asking him to come into the world. One of the verses is,

"O come, thou Wisdom from on high,
Who orderest all things mightily;
To us the path of knowledge show,
And teach us in her ways to go."⁶

Thus, in this Old Testament image of Wisdom from the 8th chapter of Proverbs the early Christians saw a figure with the same attributes as Jesus Christ. And they began to look for other examples.

³ Proverbs 8:22-23

⁴ Proverbs 8:24-25, 27, 30

⁵ *Orationes*, 30.15

⁶ Hymn 56, *The Hymnal 1982*

Another great example comes from the Jewish book of Wisdom, or the Wisdom of Solomon. This book was one of those Jewish writings that was written between the period of the Old Testament and the New Testament. It says,

"(Wisdom) is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her. For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness."⁷

It's a wonderful description. Wisdom is from God. Wisdom is an image of God.

Compare that with St. Paul's words from Colossians. Paul writes of Jesus,
"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created... He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell."⁸

That's what we celebrate this Trinity Sunday. The Wisdom of God is made manifest, made visible in Jesus Christ. The Word of God is made flesh, and has lived among us. And through the power of the Holy Spirit working in our lives, we can embrace the ways of God's Wisdom, and follow Jesus Christ, the Wisdom of God.

Critics of Christianity in the 1st and 2nd centuries, and critics of Christianity in the 20th and 21st centuries deride the idea of the Trinity. They say it's just something artificial that was made up by the early Christians. But the early Christians would respond, from the very beginning of creation, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit were part of God's nature and involved in God's work. And we see echoes of their presence in the Old Testament, as well as the New.

Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God almighty, who was and is and is to come.

Blessed be God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and blessed be his Kingdom, now and forever. Amen.

⁷ Wisdom 7:25-26

⁸ Colossians 1:15-16, 17, 19