

THE TRINITY

BY ADAM H. FRONCZEK

JUNE 11, 2017

From time to time, I choose the Psalm for the day as our primary scripture lesson. Because I don't always preach about them, the Psalms may seem like an unnecessary afterthought in our worship compared to the great stories of the Old Testament or Jesus' parables in the Gospels, but the Psalms are some of the best biblical material we have. Psalms are the recorded thoughts of regular people like you and me, trying to make sense of their faith. In the Psalms, these ancient people ask questions about the character of God: what is God like and how does God act? Pastors hear people ask these same questions when they make a visit to talk with us, difficult questions like, "Why is God doing this to me? Why isn't God answering my prayers? People also explore the character of God in happier ways. They express joy when something that has been difficult finally starts to make sense—so they say things like, "I'm so grateful to have lived through that," or "I know now that God has been with me all along." The Psalms are some of the most relevant material we have, because they are the Bible's record of people from a long time ago who said the same things we say.

Jesus quotes the Psalms all the time. In one famous instance he says: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" The Psalm he's quoting, Psalm 19 continues, "Why are you so far from helping me...I cry...but you do not answer..." (Psalm 19:1-2) Modern people think these same thoughts. This week, I read about a man named Abu Sami. During the ongoing Syrian war, this professor from Aleppo University barricaded himself in his home and lived like "an urban Robinson Crusoe," surviving on dry food and whatever he could grow in his courtyard. He collected and boiled rainwater, and read his collection of books to keep from going crazy while the war raged right outside. In December, when the Syrian Army recaptured the city and the fighting stopped, Abu Sami crossed the threshold of his home and walked outside for the first time in four and a half years (See NY Times Magazine, June 4, 2017). The carnage has come to an end in his neighborhood, but the city is decimated, and the violence in his country rages on.

The context of Abu Sami's story is incredible, but parts of it are not so rare. It reminded me of the fact that, even in our own congregation, there are elderly and infirm members of our church who haven't crossed the thresholds of their own homes in months and in some cases, years. There are others whose lives are consumed by grief, or addiction, or pain of some kind. All of these people have their own reasons for crying those ancient words from Scripture: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken

me... Why are you so far from helping me...I cry...but you do not answer..." Whatever your situation, wherever you live, the Psalms are real prayers for real people.

Many of the Psalms were written in happier times when life makes more sense; the one we read together this morning is one of those. It begins, "O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth... When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established, what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor." These are not words about suffering, but for times when life is beautiful, so beautiful that we can't help but stop right in our tracks, take notice, and say thanks. These are words for a hike along the rim of the Grand Canyon, or a glimpse of the Northern Lights. They are words we think about when, through God's grace to us, we have been able to be like God and create something. Perhaps you've written a poem, or planted a garden. Maybe you cultivated a friendship over decades that has seen you through it all. Many will tell of the inexplicable feeling the very first time you hold in your arms a child of your own. Any of these things are enough to make one say: "O Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth."

The Psalm goes on to say, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them?...but you have made them a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor." We experience the feelings we do—amazement and joy, as well as horrible suffering and abandonment—we experience these things because we are made a little lower than God. This is what separates us from the rest of God's creation. Just like the birds of the air and the fish of the sea, we are all God's handiwork, but human beings are the only ones who have minds to ask questions about how it all works. God seems distant and mysterious when times are hard; other times God seems to be a presence right beside or within us. Sometimes God seems to have forgotten all about us, and other times God seems right beside us as we hike the Grand Canyon or hold a child. Human beings are the ones who are simultaneously blessed and cursed with the capacity to wonder about where God is and who we are in relationship to this God, why we are here, and what God is up to. People write Psalms because we can't help but asking these questions.

One of the most intriguing verses of the psalm is that question, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them?" That question voices the amazement we feel that not only is God incredible, but God takes notice of us. Even in a vast and old world where our lives are so brief and we are so small, God knows every one of us by name. And yet even this idea of having God take notice of us isn't a simple idea—because being noticed by God doesn't always feel good. In the Book of Job, Job, who must have known this Psalm, actually makes fun of this verse, turning it on its head. When he has lost his home, his family, and finally his health, Job says to God:

“Do not human beings have a hard service on earth?...

[God, I wish you would] Let me alone...”

And then Job asks:

“What are human beings, that you make so much of them,

that you set your mind on them,

visit them every morning,

test them every moment?” (Job 7:1,16-18)

The writer of Psalm 8 may be thankful that God watches over human beings, but Job, who is suffering, wonders if things might get better if God were to forget about him and leave him alone! And even within Psalm 8, the writer knows that life isn't always easy. In verse two he thanks God for working “to silence the enemy and the avenger.” The writer feels that God has dealt kindly with him, but the silencing of enemies and avengers acknowledges the truth that those threats are out there in the first place. We wouldn't need God's protection so much except that in this world there are things to fear.

In the midst of all these different situations, and the confusion that results from trying to make sense of God, our tradition has come up with a few explanations. I call them explanations because they're not really answers. The problem continues that God often seems unknowable and distant, and other times seems caring and close at hand. We can't answer that problem. But there are some attempts at explaining, and one of them is the doctrine we call the Trinity.

The Trinity is a doctrine—an explanation or theory introduced by theologians. The Bible never uses the word “Trinity” to describe God, it just makes sense to a lot of people to look at what God does in the Bible and describe it this way. Sometimes God is the Creator of Genesis, chapter 1 or the heavenly parent, like the father in the story of the Prodigal Son. Other times God is the healer and teacher we have in Jesus—the one who tells us stories like the Prodigal Son in order to help us understand, and who dies for us to show solidarity, laying down his life for his friends. The Holy Spirit is the enduring presence of God in the church and in our individual lives—sometimes we feel it walking next to us beside the Grand Canyon; other times we feel it prodding us, as Jesus did, to serve the poor, the vulnerable, and the oppressed. All three of these qualities of God appear again and again in the Bible, and in the lives of regular people like you and me. Theologians call it the Trinity.

A joke went around the internet this week, started on a playful Catholic website claiming that Pope Francis talked about the Trinity in a sermon last week, explaining it by using his fidget spinner. According to the fake article, the Pope might have said, "I can use my aluminum Tri Fidget Spinner to reveal the mysteries of our God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As the spinner spins faster, the three arms seem to become a single disc, yet they maintain their individuality. It is one, yet three..."
(catholicconspiracy.com)

This internet bit was a fun piece of fake news, but it highlights something important about the way people think about the doctrine of the Trinity. Most folks who spend any time considering the Trinity are simply concerned with understanding it—finding a handy analogy like water in liquid, solid, and gas forms to explain how the three persons of God are one. I'm not sure those explanations really matter. The purpose of the Trinity isn't to explain God; in fact, it might be more about explaining the way we respond to God. Sometimes God seems magnificent, wise, and just, close at hand and reliable. And other times God seems distant and a mystery, and to us that seems unfair and wrong. The Trinity is one of many ways our tradition acknowledges that though God stays the same, God may appear to be a lot of different things to us, and some of them may seem to contradict one another. It is in the character of God not to be easily explained. And the Psalms remind us of that. Whatever we may be feeling toward God, it's okay to express those feelings. For whatever God is, God certainly seems to be strong enough to withstand our shaky faith and our criticisms. God just keeps on loving us all the same.

So, people of Knox Church, know this: we are part of a rich and ancient tradition in which people pray to God in times of incredible joy and deep human tragedy. They have always done this and always will, for it is how we cope with the mysteries of God as we wander through our journey in this world. The good news is that God can take in all of our anger and impatience and despondency; whatever you have that you need to bring, God can take it, for God has created you. God gives dignity to human beings by creating us with the capacity to ask deep and meaningful questions, and God further dignifies us by listening to those questions, for I believe that one day we will get the answers we seek when our majestic God welcomes us home.

Amen.