

# “The Power of Three”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – May 26, 2024*

Trinity Sunday

Romans 8:12-17

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

John 3:1-17

## *Introduction*

This is the first Sunday after Pentecost, traditionally called Trinity Sunday. Today’s lectionary passage from the Gospel of John is one of the few stories where all of the Trinity’s persons appear. In it, Jesus explains the mystery of being born into “the kingdom of God.”

Very few passages in the New Testament refer to all three persons of the Trinity. Many Christians don’t realize it, but our theology about the Trinity largely developed after the New Testament was written; in response to genuine confusion in early Christian communities about the relationship between Jesus and God, Jesus and the Spirit, and the Spirit and God. We often read backward into the text, and we imagine there is clarity where there was not. Arriving at the doctrine of the Trinity was a genuine, centuries-long struggle for our theological forebears (and often remains problematic even now).<sup>1</sup>

## *Read John 3:1-17*

John 3:16 is arguably the most sloganized, billboarded, and bumper-stickered verse in the entire Bible. It is not uncommon to see – at a football game or a parade – people enthusiastically waving signs that say nothing but, because it seemingly needs no more explanation, *John 3:16*.

And while many of us know – and maybe, even, as a child memorized – this verse, how do we understand it? What does it mean, for us or others, to believe; and what could it mean to have eternal life?

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<sup>1</sup> Diana Butler Bass from *The Cottage*

The encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, which leads to this famous proclamation, is filled with mystery; beginning with the way that Nicodemus comes to Jesus: clandestinely, in the night, under the cover of darkness.

Nicodemus was a public figure, a leader among the Jews, one who speaks confidently on behalf of his whole community. *We know*, he says to Jesus, *that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.* And yet, as soon as Jesus responds, it becomes apparent what Nicodemus does not know. He does not know, he cannot understand, how someone could be born again, or – as our translation says – be born from above. *How can anyone be born after growing old?* Nicodemus asks. *Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?*

This Greek word that Jesus uses here – *anōthen* – carries both of these meanings: it is impossible, with any single English word, to capture the temporal (born anew) and the spiritual (born from above); and so, like Nicodemus, all our attempts at translation flatten the meaning of the word.

Many of us were raised in or around Christian traditions that chose to place the greater emphasis on being born again; it was the moment that represented truly becoming a Christian by reciting the “sinner’s prayer” and taking Jesus into your heart. Once, as a college student riding on a train somewhere in Europe, a man from Texas wearing a ten-gallon hat – no doubt believing he was doing his evangelical duty – leaned over and asked me if I could tell him the day that I confessed my sins and was born again. After wishing I had gotten more sleep the night before and had not chosen the window seat that day, I bluntly told him I believed God had always loved me and granted me grace on more days that I could count. I don’t think he was satisfied with that answer.

Like many Christians in our day, Nicodemus had a narrow understanding of what God’s grace looks like. Salvation, which Jesus speaks about in verse 17, is always situated in a personal encounter; it does not look the same for any two people. Because he, in his very public position of power, had much to lose, Nicodemus seeks out Jesus at night, under the cover of darkness. This is very different from, for example, the Samaritan woman at the well who – in the very next chapter of John – encounters Jesus in the light of mid-day. She, as we discover, had already lost much – she was shunned by her community – so when Jesus offers her living water, she readily receives it and is utterly transformed. Salvation meant something very different to her.

In his encounter with Nicodemus, Jesus tells him that no one can receive the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. This phrase, the “kingdom of God,” so common in the other gospels, appears in John only in these verses. The more common referent is to “heaven” – the place that Jesus descends from and to which he will again ascend. For John, the Spirit will be given when Jesus is taken back up to heaven; and it is this Spirit that will then provide those who believe in Jesus with power, guidance, fellowship, and truth.

Jesus says to Nicodemus that the Spirit blows where it chooses: that, like the wind, we cannot know where it comes from or where it is going. Thus, like Jesus, the Spirit is heaven sent; it comes from God. The difference is that while Jesus is incarnated – in human form, created of flesh and blood – the Spirit is, almost by definition, mysterious.

This is a mystery that Nicodemus seems incapable of understanding. Because of what he does know, or believes he knows, he is unable to imagine the concept of a spiritual rebirth. Maybe we are not too unlike Nicodemus in that when we are told that, in Christ, all things will be made new it is difficult for us to let go of our earthly, fleshly understandings. How deeply do we believe in the potential transformation of individuals, institutions, or communities? As theologian Frances Taylor Gench says about this text, “what we know can confine us and prevent us from embracing the mysterious life of the Spirit and God’s own possibilities.”<sup>2</sup>

What this well-known section of John’s gospel does help us to understand is that God is made known to each of us, personally and contextually, in multiple aspects or persons. We call this multi-faceted revelation of the divine by the names Father, Son, and Spirit; or, alternately, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, and others. We seek descriptive but still lacking analogies for this mysterious relationship, like the three states of water: solid, liquid, and vapor; or the three parts of an apple: skin, flesh, and core. We might also think about the Trinity in temporal terms: what has been, what is, and what will be; or even as overlapping colors: like the intersection of red, yellow, and white that appears to us as some hue of orange.<sup>3</sup>

The final words from Nicodemus in this chapter before he fades into the background are, *how can these things be?* What becomes clear amid these mysteries is that any experience of this three-in-one and one-in-three God is based in relationship. No one of these divine “persons” – the Father, the Son, or the Spirit – is revealed or can be known apart from the others. Likewise, when we receive

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<sup>2</sup> Frances Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John*

<sup>3</sup> Ginger Barfield from *WorkingPreacher.com*

salvation – life eternal and in its fullness – it is not a solo experience. In the kingdom of God, we are invited into a family, a community of fellow believers and Christ-followers. Our relationships, within the church and with one another, are not just two-way – one individual with another – but also include a common connection to God’s Spirit.

There really is a power of three. Any time we encounter one person or aspect of our Trinitarian God, we are sharing in the loving relationship between the three. And every time we experience the fellowship, service, care, or prayers of a fellow Christian, God is present as a third participant in the relationship.

“This is how much God loved the world,” reads the paraphrase of John 3:16 in *The Message*, “He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life.”<sup>4</sup>

God, in all the personal and contextual ways that we experience this mysterious Trinity, loved us too much to leave us alone; and continues to love us so much that we will eternally be engaged in the relationships of life that are both from above and ever being renewed. Thanks be to God for this promise of unending love. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Message*