

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31, Psalm 8, Romans 5:1-5, John 16:12-15

One of the most important passages in the Old Testament, both to Christians and to Jews, is Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 4. It is said daily in Jewish morning and evening prayers, and so it has its own name – the *Shema Yisrael*. This verse is the first thing I ever learned to say in Hebrew: “*Shema Yisrael, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad*” – “Hear, Israel, the LORD your God, the LORD is One.”

The very next verse is what Jesus identifies as the greatest commandment – “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind, and all your strength.” So you see how important this section of Deuteronomy is. It teaches us to be monotheists – to believe in the One, True, Living God. And it teaches us how to live our lives in response, loving the one God with the wholeness of ourselves.

And I think this line is also the most important verse whenever we turn to think of the Mystery of the Trinity. “Hear, Israel, the LORD your God, the LORD is *One*.”

When we begin to speak about the Trinity – about God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – we begin here. Every time we tell the story of the Trinity in the Nicene Creed, we begin “We believe in One God.”

And let me begin this Trinity Sunday sermon by affirming another important truth, as well - that the Trinity is a *Mystery*. God is beyond our understanding. When we stretch our minds to try to grasp God, we can just get hints of glimpses. We certainly cannot comprehend in fullness what it is to be God – as limited, created beings, we can't experience the fullness of God's own internal life.

We just have hints of tiny glimpses. Clues that point toward what God's nature is like.

We hear God speak about Himself. First we hear the Lord say “the Lord is One”. But then we do also get these terms of relationality in God's account of His own Being. Jesus speaks of his “Father”. The Father speaks from heaven and names Jesus “Son”. Jesus ascends to the Father and they send us the Holy Spirit. And somehow, all of this is God. And God is One.

This is hard to wrap our minds around when we try to give an account of God's internal life – what it is like to be God. But perhaps we can grasp God's oneness a little more clearly when we consider God's actions. Because whenever God acts toward the world, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are acting together.

We see this in the act of Creation itself. We think, or course, of God the Father creating heaven and earth. But we hear in Genesis Chapter One that in the beginning “a wind from God” moved over the face of the deep. But that “wind from God” is just one way of translating a phrase that equally can be translated “the breath of God” which is an equal translation to “the Holy Spirit”. Wind, breath, and spirit are all one word in the Bible's Hebrew or Greek.

God as Father, and the breath of God – the Holy Spirit - are present there at creation. And then God speaks, and creation hears the “Word of God”. And that is another name for the Son of God – who is Jesus.

There we see all three – the breath of God, the word of God, and the Source of both. All of God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The fullness of God the Trinity is present there at the moment of creation.

Early Christians looked to some of the language we find in our passage from Proverbs today to speak especially of the Son's eternal presence with God the Father. The language found in Proverbs and elsewhere that describes God's "Wisdom" has often been attributed to God the Son.

So today we hear, as if it were Jesus speaking: "Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth" and we think of the only Son of God, "eternally begotten of the Father."

We hear "When he established the heavens, I was there . . . when he marked out the foundations of the earth, I was beside him, like a master worker." And we think of how the Word of God was present as an essential part of God's act of creation.

Now in some ways this language in Proverbs falls very short when we try to speak of the Trinity. Since it was originally recorded to speak of Divine Wisdom without a conception of "God the Son", we hear Wisdom say in this passage, "God created me at the beginning."

But we know that in the case of God the Son, he was not created, because "In the Beginning" – already – "there was the Word. And the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

So I think that's all probably done away with any lingering confusion about the Trinity, right?

I've heard it said, and this certainly doesn't prove anything, but I have heard it said that one compelling argument for the truth of the Trinity is that no one would have wanted to make this up as an account of God. If we could choose, we would want God to be easy to understand and to explain to others. We would not want to introduce complication that even the most learned scholars of the Trinity cannot claim to fully understand.

But if God is Triune, if both three-ness and one-ness are part of the nature of God, as Christians came to understand that they are, then this is something we can't explain away, but must believe, trust in, and perhaps even try to give some account of. So perhaps this is a sign that Trinity is a concept that comes directly from God and not humans, because it is exceedingly hard for a human mind to grasp on to it.

We see this clearly in our attempt to use human language to describe God. We say that we believe in one God in three persons. And the word "person" has just become increasingly confusing over time. Because today when we say "persons" we usually mean "individuals". But God is not three separate people, because that would be 3 Gods.

The trouble is that "person" has changed meaning in the last 2,000 years. The ancient Latin word was "*persona*" – which actually means a "mask", as something an actor would wear when playing a role.

So that is a term that leaves a lot more room to speak of one God with three "*persona*" – though I still hesitate to try to translate that too literally, because the three "*persona*" of the Trinity always exist and act together – God does not just play 3 different roles of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at completely different times.

The Greek-speaking Christians had similar concerns, and didn't love that Latin word. They were concerned that it was not an adequate translation of their older Greek word to explain God's "three-ness" – "*hypostasis*". And "*hypostasis*" is even more impossible to try to translate. In Greek accounts of the Trinity we hear that God is one "*ousia*" with three "*hypostases*", which means something like one existence with three individual realities.

So I invite you to join me in running for aid to St. Augustine of Hippo, who provides my favorite explanation of what “*persona*” or “*hypostasis*” means. He said that it is simply a word we choose to use so that we have something to say in answer to the question “Three what?” Because we had to have some word. But we cannot understand how God experiences being Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But we have encountered God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We have experienced God as Creator, as the Being who is the Source of all things. We have experienced God, who came to earth as Jesus Christ. The first Christians knew and touched him. We still encounter God the Son, physically, and touch him ourselves when he comes to earth in the Holy Eucharist.

We have experienced God, most of all, perhaps, as Holy Spirit, since the Holy Spirit is the presence of God with us now, at every moment. Dwelling in us, sustaining our very breath. Blessing us with those moments when we experience transcendence. The Holy Spirit is the source of every moment when we *feel* the presence of God.

So we try to speak as clearly as we can about the Trinity, out of a desire to share our numerous and various encounters with God. But we also know that at some point we will fall silent. We will say “God is Triune – God is three in One. God is a Mystery. He is God.”

And if we accept our incomprehension of the Being who is beyond mortal comprehension, then we will stand, or perhaps fall to our knees, in silent wonder. Overwhelmed, perhaps, overcome - in awe and worship of the vast Mystery that is God.

And that will be enough.