

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Holy Trinity Sunday  
May 22, 2016  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Decorah, Iowa  
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[click here to read scripture passages for the day](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

When we have powerful experiences we often find that words fail us. We resort to phrases like, "It was one of those things you can't describe", "I can't put it into words", "you just had to be there." Except that's pretty unsatisfying for us and our listeners. Usually we want to tell people about meaningful experiences to try to make sense of them and to share what we've observed or learned. So we try our best to find words: "it was a mountaintop experience", "it blew my mind", "it changed my life."

That same dynamic was at work as early Christians tried to put words to their experience of God as three and yet one. Early Christians experienced God as the giver of life, as Jesus who lived among them, and as the Spirit poured out on them - as three beings and yet all one and the same God. This was, and is, difficult to explain and understand. It's a mystery that our words and reason can't capture. But the early church worked to put some words around these experiences of God to try to make sense of them so that it could tell others good news about God. Their work led to the doctrine of the Trinity and to the creeds that we confess with the whole church - the church across the ages and around the world.

The doctrine of the Trinity grew out of experiences of God and was intended to help others know about this God. Yet along the way, the experiential part of the Trinity often got lost. We got so focused on explaining and trying to figure things out that we got stuck in heady formulations at a distance from actual experiences of God. The doctrine became a conversation stopper - "this is how it is, believe this or else."

It doesn't have to be that way. The doctrine can be part of a conversation between our experiences, others' experiences, scripture, and reason. It can still help us to make sense of our experiences and to share the good news that we have a God who is relational and who wants to be in relationship, in conversation with us. So today, I want to tell you about one of the ways the doctrine of the Trinity has helped me to make sense of my experiences and has given me hope. It is a hope that has come out of suffering, it is a hope that does not disappoint, as our reading from Romans today says.

When I was in high school I spent a lot of time out in God's creation hiking and camping with my church youth group. I felt really close to God in the wilderness and in awe of all the beauty. One summer we went to a camp in Colorado. In the middle of the week we set out to climb a 14,000 ft. peak. The sky was clear when we started but as we neared the peak, storm clouds rolled in. Before we could get to safety, lightning struck the mountain right by where my friend Luke was hiking. The lightning then went up through his body. The camp staff carried Luke down to 12,000 feet where he was met by a truck and rushed to the ER. He was treated immediately but the damage had been done. Luke was paralyzed from the waist down.

The next summer we spent a week at a beautiful camp on a lake in Minnesota. That Friday my friends and I went home but our youth director, Renee, stayed to help out at a family weekend. She spent most of the

weekend running the zip line over the water. Before she headed home that Sunday, she decided to take one last ride on the zip line but didn't get her harness attached properly. She fell and died.

As I wrestled with Luke's accident and Renee's death, I had so many questions. How could God create a world in which 30 year-old youth directors die while serving at a Christian camp? How could a 16 year-old be paralyzed by a lightning strike? I didn't believe God had caused these things to happen but how could a good God allow them to happen? I had no answers to these questions. I've brought these and similar questions to studies and preaching ever since, and the doctrine of the Trinity has been helpful. It has helped me realize that I need a God who is more than a creator to have peace and hope in the face of suffering.

Many religions agree that there is a creator who made the world good and beautiful. Many religions share fairly similar creation stories. Most of us have experienced the glory of God in creation: on top of a mountain, in a gentle rain, when looking at a baby. Yet, what happens when lightning strikes, when the gentle rain becomes a flood, when a baby dies? Where is God then? Is God good? Does God love us? It's hard to know.

We can experience God the creator out in creation but we can never be sure that the creator loves us, that the creator is for us. It is only in Jesus Christ that we see the truth that God is for us. In Jesus Christ we see a God who left the glory of heaven and joined us in our suffering. He suffered and died showing that nothing, not even death, can separate us from God. Then he rose again showing that God does not desire death and that not even death can stop God from loving us. He died and rose again and now when we wonder, "where is God?", we can know that God is in the midst of suffering and death, bringing new life.

There are so many questions about creation, our broken world, and God that we can't answer or understand. All we know is that we are not alone in asking these questions. Jesus entered our suffering and even asked questions of God like, "My God, My God why have you forsaken me." As our Romans text today tells us, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. It is through God the Christ, not God the creator, that we come to know God is for us. And it is through the Holy Spirit that we know that God is with us in each moment. We don't just have a God who entered our suffering and rose again long ago. We have a God who is as close to us as our breath.

And by the power of the Holy Spirit we can experience Christ Jesus present with us in his body and blood at communion and in his body the church. I couldn't put words around it at age 17 and 18, but I know now that what got me through my questions and grief was the power of the Holy Spirit working through other people. After Renee's funeral my youth group and our parents all got together to cry and pray. We committed to keep meeting together throughout that school year and that made a huge difference. Holy Communion, which allows me to taste that God is with us, helped. In the church, I found I am not alone with my questions and struggles, none of us are. The Spirit is present with us, pouring love into our hearts as our text from Romans today says. That love gives us hope that does not disappoint.

I have come to understand that our triune God creates us, is for us, and is with us. This gives me hope.

What gives you hope?

How have you experienced God? Will you share that with us?

Wednesday night worship this summer will provide an opportunity for you to put your experience into words by sharing a story, telling us why you love a certain hymn, or offering a poem or devotional you've found meaningful. Your sharing is a way that the Holy Spirit can work in all of us to give us hope. Whether you speak, or not, the Spirit works through each of us as we gather together. Your presence here brings hope.

Let's pause for a moment to rest in the hope we share.

