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Feast of the Holy Trinity One Year Series 2017

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Feast of the Holy Trinity One Year Series

Luther

1. This festival requires us to instruct the people in the dogma of the Holy Trinity, and to strengthen both memory and faith concerning it. This is the reason why we take up the subject once more. Without proper instruction and a sound foundation in this regard, other dogmas cannot be rightly and successfully treated. The other festivals of the year present the Lord God clothed in his works and miracles. For instance: on Christmas we celebrate his incarnation; on Easter his resurrection from the dead; on Whitsunday the gift of the Holy Spirit and the establishment of the Christian Church. Thus all the other festivals present the Lord in the guise of a worker of one thing or another. But this Trinity Festival discloses him to us as he is in himself. Here we see him apart from whatever guise assumed, from whatever work done, solely in his divine essence. We must go beyond and above all reason, leaving behind the evidence of created things, and hear only God's own testimony concerning himself and his inner essence; otherwise we shall remain unenlightened.

3. O shameless reason! How can we poor, miserable mortals grasp this mystery of the Trinity? We who do not understand the operation of our own physical powers – speech, laughter, sleep, things whereof we have daily experience? Yet we would, untaught by the Word of God, guided merely by our fallible head, pronounce upon the very nature of God. It is not supreme blindness for man, when he is unable to explain the most insignificant physical operation daily witnessed in his own body, to presume to understand something above and beyond the power of reason to comprehend, something whereof only God can speak, and to rashly affirm that Christ is not God?

4. Indeed, if reason were the standard of judgment in such matters, I also might make a successful venture; but when the conclusions of even long and mature reflections upon the subject are compared with Scripture, they will not stand. Therefore we must repeat, even though a mere stammering should be the result, what the Scriptures say to us, namely: that Jesus Christ is true God and that the Holy Spirit is likewise true God, yet there are not three Gods; not three divine natures, as we may speak of three brothers, three angels, three suns, three windows. There is one indivisible divine essence, while we recognize a distinction as to the persons.

(Complete Sermons of Martin Luther, Vol. 4.2. Ed. John Lenker. Baker, 2000. pp. 26-7.)

Sermon Idea: Except one confess this faith... (from the Athanasian Creed)

The Christian faith asserts that the Trinity is essential to being a Christian. A denial of the Trinity is a denial of the Christian faith! Why do we say that? It seems like such a harsh and narrow minded thing to say. But it really is not. In fact, to say it any other way, either modalism or arianism is to give us a false hope and to eviscerate forgiveness itself. Forgiveness is what is on

the line with Trinity, nothing less. This all returns to the question of who was on the cross on the day that Jesus died. Modalism says God takes multiple forms and modes, but there is only one God. If that is the case who died on the cross? To whom was Jesus speaking when he commended his Spirit into the hands of the Father? He could not have been God, or if he was God who raised him from the dead? If it was not God on the cross are my sins really forgiven? Are yours? Arianism suggests that Jesus is not really God, he is a high creation, a really good man, a great moral teacher, something, anything, just not quite God. There was a time when he was not, said Arius. But here we return to the same problem. If it was not God's blood which dripped onto that Palestinian soil, what hope do we have? Is the death of some angelic being really enough? Are you sure?

Thus today we confess Trinity, and in the confession of this strange and inexplicable doctrine we also proclaim the forgiveness and life which transformed Isaiah and Peter and you and me. We preach Christ crucified, a mystery. God was on that cross and that makes all the difference in the world.

Collect for the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, You have given us grace to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity by the confession of a true faith and to worship the Unity in the power of the Divine Majesty. Keep us steadfast in this faith and defend us from all adversities; for You, O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, live and reign one God, now and forever.

The prayer starts us out on the glorious and terrifying aspects of God. He is almighty and everlasting, but then it goes to God the gift giver. As if we did not pick up on that, it tells us that the gift is a gift of grace, isn't that redundant?

The gift is a strange one to most of us. We are given a gift to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity. Like a kid who opens a package of underwear on Christmas morning we are tempted to say "thanks" here but not be terribly convincing. But that is a mistake. Underwear is actually pretty important and the confession of the Trinity is essential to calling ourselves Christian. But this is not our doing it really is a gift, a gift made possible by the Holy Spirit.

The acknowledgment of the glory of the Trinity comes by a confession of the true faith. In this day and age, this will sound odd to people. Is there a true faith? Many will question this and Trinity is a frontal assault on that sort of thinking.

The other gift is to worship the Unity in the power of the divine Majesty. English, being a Latin derived language fails us here. Greek has multiple words for essence/substance. They can use one for the single and one for the three-ness. God thus has one substance and three substances. In Greek it works better than it does for us. So we are stuck with talking about Trinity and Unity, and capitalizing them. What does that mean?

The petition is rather simply. Keep us steadfast in this faith and protect us from adversities. The prayer is much more in the ascription above.

How will we preach trinity in a way that anyone of our parishioners would actually pray to keep it? How many of our people would actually fight for the doctrine of the Trinity? How many of us would actually recommend it?

Readings

Isaiah 6:1-8

¹In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ²Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³And one called to another and said:

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"

⁴And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. ⁵And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

⁶Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

⁸And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here am I! Send me."

In the year that Uzziah died... Uzziah, also known as Ahaziah, was a generally good king; although, the Deuteronomic history notes that the high places were not torn down. It appears that he was struck by some sort of leprosy and he ruled with his son Jotham for a period. His reign was particularly long, 52 years, only exceeded by his thoroughly wicked great grandson Manasseh who ruled for 55 years. (Jotham and good king Hezekiah were between them.)

Some have suggested that Isaiah somehow had to wait until Uzziah died to speak. The ascription to his book in chapter 1:1 says that he saw the visions in the reign of Uzziah, but this seems like a discussion without much point.

Isaiah was probably a member of the royal family. His book clearly evidences a sophisticated education which would have likely only been available to a member of a noble family. He also, see chapter 7, seems to have unrestricted access to the king. Some have postulated that he was a cousin of some sort. It is a speculation however.

Interestingly Isaiah locates his call vision here in chapter six, after five chapters of rather depressing and distressing prophecy. He introduces one of his major themes, the remnant theology, and speaks of the destruction of Israel and Judah. In chapter five he likens the nation of Judah to a vineyard which is producing sour grapes despite the best viticulture practices.

Isaiah has a vision while in the temple. That is in itself something significant. Remember the collect connects this to worship. He is there to worship and suddenly sees behind the altar rail and the altar, behind the sacrament and the stained glass, he sees heaven itself and the God he sees is huge. The hem of his robe fills the temple. The whole place is shaken by the praise of the beings who are before his throne. What beings they are too: Seraphs, which in Hebrew is the word for “burning ones.”

Isaiah’s reaction is quite normal. He is terrified. His articulation of his terror is interesting because he realizes that God is holy and he is not. He is in the presence of the Ancient of days and the Holy One of Israel and he is a man of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips.

One of the seraphs brings a coal, in tongs, (when a burning angel need tongs to pick something up, you know it’s hot!) He touches Isaiah’s lips and cleanses him, declaring his sin forgiven. Interesting, that forgiveness comes at a cost, through an act which is considered torture by most standards. Sound familiar?

Isaiah is then transformed. He was the wallflower hoping the melt into the back ground and not be seen lest he die. Now he is the eager volunteer, virtually jumping up with his hand raised, “Send me! Send me!” what has made the difference?

Why do we have this text today? Probably because the angels sing “holy, holy, holy...” Many patristic and faithful theologians have mused Trinitarian thoughts when they heard Isaiah record that three-fold cry of holiness. It could be, it might not be. The preacher will not want to push that too far in a context of Trinitarian doubts. The skeptic will not be convinced by that argument but the one who already believes may be edified.

The other interesting intersection for this is that we sing this as part of our liturgy. The Sanctus starts with this and ends with the songs of praise sung when Jesus entered Jerusalem. Interesting in its placement, this song is sung at the beginning of the communion liturgy, right after the prayer called the Proper Preface. (I always love that prayer, but I so seldom hear it anymore. Are we really in that much of a hurry?)

It seems that when we confess God is present, we are supposed to sing. It is a dangerous sort of place so we sing with the angels and the people who welcome Jesus to save them. They did not get zapped, so we sing those songs. The Sanctus is really a statement that we are like Isaiah in the presence of God.

This along with the Epistle reading for the day may give us pause. Trinity Sunday might not be about us understanding God but perhaps about us standing the presence of God, in the midst of his holiness. It should terrify us, it should fry us, as Isaiah fears, but the whole goal of this day is to touch us with the holiness of God and thereby be made holy. We might preach a sermon which seeks to have the hearer running down the aisle like Isaiah here, shouting, “Pick me!”

Sermon Idea: Here am I, send me! (OT lesson – That the holiness of God would infuse the hearer with both holy awe and holy joy.)

Isaiah found himself in the presence of God. Today we find ourselves in the very heart of God's nature revealed to us. What are we doing here? Isaiah thought he was about to die, a sinful man in the presence of a holy God. But it did not work out that way. God dispatched his seraphim with burning coal to Isaiah, purging his sin, rendering him holy. We can all look forward to that!

The preacher will want to talk baptism here. Baptism is where this touch of God came to us. John the Baptist predicted that the one who came after him would baptize with fire. Can we make that a nod to Isaiah's "kiss the burning coal" cleansing? In a Trinitarian name we were baptized and God washed away our sins, adopting us as his own children. Our lips are not touched by hot coals. Our foreheads are wet with the cool water of baptism. I will take that over seraphic scalding any day!

Isaiah was transformed by that touch into a totally different person. Where he had been trying to hide under the furniture lest he be observed, now he was eagerly volunteering. God has also brought us today into the very center of his kingdom, his very heart. We are in the presence of the Holy God here. Like Isaiah, we should be afraid to be here. But we are not. For we have learned something. God has not come to destroy but to save. Jesus' words in the Gospel lesson have been taken to heart. God has come to render us holy. No flying angel will come and touch our lips today, but the body and blood of Christ, broken and shed on a cross, will pass these lips and the effect will be the same. An unclean people of unclean lips will be cleansed and made holy.

We have a tendency to think of holiness as something which we would render impure by our sin. As if the holiness of God is tainted by our sin. Instead the traffic runs the other way. God's holiness comes to us. We do not achieve holiness, we receive it. God's holiness is seen in his rendering us holy.

This sermon might make a great kick off to the many needs a congregation will see in the coming months. VBS, Summer Sunday School, perhaps officers are elected, etc. I would exercise some caution here. Don't make God's holiness a tool for institutional advancement, but at the same time, you would be preaching the text to suggest that Isaiah is volunteering here. I think here is where you want to put the joy into sermon. Isaiah's fear is replaced by an eager joy. God has changed something here.

Psalm 29

¹Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

²Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness.

³The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the LORD, over many waters.

⁴The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.

⁵The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.

⁶He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.

⁷The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire. ⁸The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

⁹The voice of the LORD makes the deer give birth
and strips the forests bare,
and in his temple all cry, "Glory!"

¹⁰The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.

¹¹May the LORD give strength to his people!
May the LORD bless his people with peace!

This psalm is an interesting and good choice for this day. It does not deal with the Trinity directly, but it does in another way. The psalmist urges us to ascribe to God all the power and glory. Here we speak of the worship of the unity. But then it launches into a description of what the "voice of the LORD" does. But John tells us that the logos, the dabar, the Word of God is Jesus.

The LORD blesses the people with peace.

Romans 11:33-36

³³ Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

³⁴ "For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?"

³⁵ "Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?"

³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

Luther

(After a lengthy section in which he lays out multiple arguments for Trinity from Scripture, Luther continues here;)

11. There are many passages of similar import, particularly in the Gospel of John. So we cannot evade the truth but must say God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy spirit are three individual persons, yet of one divine essence. We do not, as the Jews and Turks derisively allege, worship three Gods; we worship one God, represented to us in the Scriptures as three persons.

12. Now, what care we that reason should regard it as foolishness? It requires no skill to cavil over these things: I could do that as well as others. But praise God, I have the grace to desire no controversy on this point. When I know it is the Word of God that declares the Trinity, that God has said so, I do not inquire how it can be true; I am content with the simple Word of God, let it harmonize with reason as it may. And every Christian should adopt the same course with respect to all the articles of our faith. Let there be no caviling and contention on the score of possibility; be satisfied with the inquiry: Is it the Word of God? If a thing be his Word, if he has spoken it, you may confidently rely upon it he will not lie nor deceive you, though you may not understand the how and the when.

Since this article of the Holy Trinity is certified by the Word of God, and the sainted fathers have from the inception of the Church chivalrously defended and maintaining the article against every sect, we are not to dispute as to how God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one God. This is an incomprehensible mystery. It is enough that God in his Word gives such testimony of himself. Both his nature and its revelation to us are far beyond our understanding.

(The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther, Vol 4.2. Ed.: Nickolas Lenker. Baker, 2000. pp. 30-31.)

This text used to show up in the old LW pericopes in the late summer/early fall. One year I made a vow to preach the epistles, no matter what came up. This was tough. It is wonderful and it praises God beautifully, but what do you preach about here? Paul says God knows a whole bunch and I cannot begin to imagine that I am as smart as he is. That is all wonderful and true, but not much Gospel there.

Here is where the preacher who has taken that vow might go. First of all, be glad that we are not dealing with a God whose thoughts are like our thoughts or whose ways are on our plane. God forgives and God redeems when surely human reason would only destroy and punish.

The other interesting line is in vs. 35 when Paul asserts that God is not reacting to us. He is just not for sale. We cannot buy his favor or earn his praise. He is not impressed with our works or our faith for that matter. He is God and has never needed us or anything that we do. His love comes to us another way from another sort of motive. That is Gospel because the way and motive are nothing else than Jesus and God's very nature. God sent his Son because he is love, he loves.

John 3:1-15 (16-17)

¹Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." ³Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" ⁵Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

⁹Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Luther

(Luther seemed to be of two minds about the inclusion of this text. I have included the introductory paragraph of both sermons recorded in Klug's text which are at significant variance. But they end up in the same place so we will only record the subsequent notes of one.)

1. I don't know why this Gospel lesson was selected to be read on this Trinity Sunday, for it really doesn't deal with the subject of the Trinity. The words *trinitas unitas* are really mathematical terms. And yet, we can't talk about God without using such words, But at the same time, it is also true that when we use human language to speak about God it seems to have a different ring to it, a whole new connotation.

(The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther, Vol. 6. Ed.: Eugene Klug. Baker, 2000. p. 206.)

1. This is a sublime, profound Gospel lesson, though not particularly suited for children or for slow-witted people. Yet we will have a go at it, to see whether we can penetrate and shed some light on its meaning. The Lord Christ is speaking here of two kinds of birth: of the fleshly birth by a father and mother, and of the spiritual birth by water and Spirit. Those born of the flesh are called human beings, and possess body and soul, reason and senses, eyes, ears, and limbs, characteristic of a human being. Those born of the Spirit are called Christians and enter the

kingdom of God. Christ preaches to Nicodemus specifically of spiritual birth, saying that anyone who desires to be a Christian and to enter the kingdom of God must have another birth besides the one in the flesh. The old fleshly birth avails nothing. All who want to be Christians must completely put off the "old Adam," seek a second birth and be born anew. It is a discourse on the new birth.

2. Of this subject Nicodemus understands nothing at all, and no doubt it is because he knows of no other than the first, the customary physical birth, and when Christ juxtaposes the new, spiritual birth, or rebirth, to this, it is impossible for him to understand what Christ is saying. He thinks of a husband and a wife, and says, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?"

3. Therefore the Lord Christ adds to the text this explanation....

7. This is still not enough for Nicodemus, who is more and more astonished, and says, "How can these things be?" So Christ continues further: "Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?" In other words, Dear Nicodemus, the more you search this out with reason and try to probe it, the less you will understand. Pharisee and teacher of Israel though you are. Therefore, as I said, you will neither understand nor learn anything of this spiritual birth, unless you ignore your old head and your five senses, and simply believe the word which I preach to you. I will tell you what the blowing and rushing of the Holy Spirit really is; listen to me now. When the Holy Spirit enkindles, this is his way of stirring:

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

8. That is the true stirring of the Holy Spirit. Christ says, Nicodemus, if you now perceive this stirring and believe the Word, then the Holy Spirit comes and makes of you a new man, rescued from death and hell. Born to the kingdom of God and to eternal life, as a newborn child of God.

13. Now then, in order to be born again, we need to comprehend and appropriate this. How does that come about? By water and the Spirit, Christ says, by the proclamation of the gospel and baptism; in other words, through the external gospel ministry of the church, the Holy Spirit works in the heart of man. The word of the gospel manifests to the heart the crucified Christ who was lifted up, as the only Savior and Mediator. Baptism is a true sign and testimony together with the Word, by it the Word is confirmed, and with it God covenants to continue perpetually and unshakably in his promised grace and propose to wash away our sin and eradicate it. Where the word and baptism are applied, the Holy Spirit is effectual to excite and awaken the heart to faith, and to lay hold of Christ's promise confidently, with fear and trembling. If a man, through the Holy Spirit, firmly believes that Christ, the Son of God, was lifted up on the cross to die for our sins, this produces a new heart and a new mind, and consequently a brand new person by the Word in the soul, until the Last Day when the whole

body will be radically renewed in its nature, for it will be brighter and more radiant than the sun.

14. What a great and glorious thing this is, that you believe on him who hung on the cross for your sins, and that you obtain redemption and salvation from sin, death, and the devil, wholly without human work or cooperation in any way! Wonderful, too, is the account of how those poor people who were under attack by the fiery serpents were spared and healed without any kind of medical help when they believed and looked at the bronze serpent on the pole! That faith in the crucified Christ should bring certain salvation and deliverance from sin and eternal death is something that human reason cannot possibly understand or conceive of. Therefore, the word must be preached without ceasing and this article effectually driven home, in order to fortify ourselves against the misgivings of our reason.

15. This teaching produces hearts that are stout, courageous in affliction and the temptation to sin, confident and fearless, hearts that declare: Even though I have been stung by the devil and his hellish poison, bitten by sin, troubled by my conscience, aware that by birth I am a child of wrath and condemned to death, nevertheless I believe and am convinced that my Lord Jesus Christ bore my sins on the cross, overcame death, and has reconciled me with my heavenly Father. I have been baptized into this, the promise of eternal life is mine. Therefore, I will joyfully put my whole trust in him. In the same way that Christ by being lifted up sent the devil packing, so every person who is born anew puts to flight sin, death, the devil, the world, and all evil, by faith in Christ who was lifted up.

(Complete Sermons of Martin Luther Vol. 6. Ed.: Eugene Klug. Baker, 2000. pp. 217-222.)

This text takes place at night, when Nicodemus comes to visit Jesus and ask him questions. The nocturnal, dark setting is really important, especially when we get down to verse 19ff. John is a masterful communicator. There is not a large or difficult word in this whole text, and yet it is profound and something one could consider for many years without completely exhausting it.

Jesus speaks of birth and life. This is deep stuff. The bronze serpent reference in verse 14 immerses us in deep water. Jesus likens himself to this problematic and strange story which is such a challenge for the reader to understand and leaves us with many questions. Jesus tells us that looking at him in faith is to have eternal life. Are these the heavenly things which Nicodemus cannot understand or are they earthly things, or is this really just an accommodation to the fact that he cannot understand them? And verse 16, perhaps the most commonly memorized verse in all the Bible, is that part of the heavenly stuff or the earthly?

When we read verse 16, do we say that God loved the world so much that he gave his only begotten Son? Or do we say that God loved the world this way: he gave his only begotten son? Is the emphasis on the amount of the love or on the mode of loving? How do we understand the “so” in the first phrase of verse 16?

Some emphasized the “so much” way to read it. Others look at it the other way.

We also wondered what the “World” was that was saved. Is it the people? Is it the whole cosmos? Is it the system of the world in which we live? Is this a restoration of the relationships we all enjoy and endure together? We have to pull into verse 16 the content of verse 17. To read one without the other seems to seriously miss the point.

Phil’s literal wooden translation of the text: Thus did God love world: he gave his only Son.

I John 4:9-10 seems to clarify this for us:

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

If you back up a little earlier in the text there is a really interesting little thing that happens in verse 11. The number of the “you” changes. Greek, unlike English, had the ability, by the form of the verb and the pronoun, to indicate whether one was talking to one “you” or two or more “you’s.” Truly ancient Greek (Homeric) even had a dual form which allowed one to know if there were one, two, or more than two “you’s” on the other side of that conversation. What all this Greek suggests to us is that there is an audience shift that happens at this point. Think of watching this little tableau on TV unfolding before you, and suddenly Jesus turns to the camera and starts addressing you and the rest of the viewing audience.

This perhaps then changes the question in the first paragraph above. Is it no longer Jesus talking to Nicodemus but now is it in fact John talking to us? Is John, frustrated with his audience, telling his audience that the story he has just told them is in fact an earthly story and they are not getting it? How can his Gospel go into the real content he has in mind? Has John’s audience, like the Pharisees of old, not received the testimony? If this is the case, should our editor put in a paragraph break at verse 11 and is the “Truly, truly,…” the beginning of a new conversation John is having with the audience? (Remember the ancient manuscripts did not have any punctuation, paragraph markers, or even spaces between the words.)

Now, before we make too much of this, it is also possible to say that Jesus is expanding the reference here to include the whole group of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, the friends of Nicodemus.

Perhaps the final conclusion of this whole discussion is the reality that this text may not be as cut and dried as we like to make it out to be. An exegetical humility is called for here. But the preacher needs to stand in that pulpit and say something. Schwaffling around and hemming and hawing is not going to cut it. You will have to decide what you want to do with this, but don’t do it in a way that it precludes another understanding of the text. Offer up an interpretation and application, but don’t feel the need to condemn or otherwise reject what another says. God’s Spirit blows where and when he wants to, says Jesus. Don’t constrain him only to blow in your ways.

Most likely, if we choose to preach this text, we will pretty much lift it out of context and simply preach it as the Word of God to us. And that is not a bad way to take it. It works. John 3:16 is just so attractive, often called the Gospel in a nutshell, a nugget which summarizes the whole Biblical message. God so loved the world he gave his son so that all who believe might have eternal life. For God is not interested in destroying the world. That is not his desire. He wants to save the world. He loves the world, you see. So much for that wrathful and scary God that a lot of people seem to conceptualize. The operating economy of salvation here is faith. God does this through believing. Whoever believes is already saved. Whoever does not believe, is already condemned. This is not a matter of what one does, it is a matter of what one is.

The judgment is not based on some relative scale or whether one met the societal standard of acceptable behavior. The criterion of judgment is the relationship to Christ. The word for believe here is “pistis” not actually belief but the word for faith, that relationship with God in which God saves us. The contrast with belief should be maintained even though English doesn’t have the vocabulary that allows for it. One can believe without trust, but faith implies that the belief results in trust. I can believe that the pilot will fly the plane to Denver. It is another thing to board the thing and put my life in his hands. To disbelieve (un-pistis) the Christ is to reject the very name of the only begotten son of God. The one who rejects the light and flees to the darkness like some cockroach is in fact a cockroach. He loves the evil, and he does not want his life to see the light of day. He covers it up, either by doing things in secret or by the layers of deception and secrecy which stifle countless people even today. He who comes into the light wants his life to be exposed, wants it to be seen, because it really is not his life that is seen, it is the life which is in God which is seen. As Paul will say in Romans, it is the righteousness of God which is revealed in our lives, we have no room to boast here except in Christ.

Sermon Idea: He has bridged the Gap! (That the hearer would rejoice to confess that the Father has sent the Son, the Son has obeyed, suffered, and died, and now pours out the Spirit that we may confess, see, believe, and have life!)

Sin has rendered me helpless and I don’t like it. But praise be to God the Father! He has sent his Son, and that Son having run his course has returned to heavenly glory and poured out the third member of the trinity, the Spirit. Today, because that Spirit is poured out, I can confess the truth of God, He has loved this creation despite its rebellion and sent Jesus. Jesus has done the holy deed, restored and reconciled the whole creation, and now we are united with God through the Spirit. This is not always easy to see, but God’s love is great and he will not abandon those for whom he has died. Just look how much better off we are than Nicodemus, and look at how he was given courage by the end of Jesus life to go and request the body of Jesus with Joseph. The light had already begun to shine in Nicodemus’ heart, just as it has shone in your heart in the waters of your baptism and the preaching and teaching and fellowship and love which have shaped your life. God has accomplished that which we could not. He has bridged the great divide which separated the sinners like Isaiah from himself. Not with a coal of fire applied to the lips, but with nails applied to his own incarnate hands, with water applied to your head and mine.

This sermon will tie God's rescue of the fallen world to the Trinity. The act of rescuing the world has revealed the very nature of God to us. We see his "Threeness" in the actions of the Father, Son, and Spirit.