



From the Pulpit: May 26, 2024

Trinity Sunday—Memorial Day Weekend

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Genesis 1:1–5; Revelation 1:8

God After...I: The One Who Is, Who Was, and Who Is To Come

The lesson from the Hebrew Scripture comes from the book of Genesis:

When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Then from the end of the Bible, the Revelation of St. John, The Apocalypse:

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

There's an ancient, revered rule in rhetoric: if you want your audience to remember something, make a list of three:

Snap, Crackle, Pop,
veni, vidi, vici,
Friends, Romans, Countrymen,
blood, sweat, and tears,
location, location, location,
three little pigs,
three blind mice,
three bears,

three wise men,
three musketeers,
Scrooge's three ghosts,
MacBeth's three weird sisters.

"It's Trinity Sunday.... It's the only festival of the Church Year that is devoted to a doctrine, rather than to a person or an event,"

Someone pointed out that things are funny in three's¹:
Moe, Curly, and Larry,
a priest, a minister, a rabbi walk into a bar,
the executive, the legislative, and the judicial,
Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.
Things are funny in three's.

It's Trinity Sunday. It's not as theatrical as other church holidays—like the fire, wind and ruddy parameters of last week's Pentecost, for example.

It's the only festival of the Church Year that is devoted to a **doctrine**, rather than to a **person** or an **event**, like Christmas or Easter.

But once a year, the Christian Church pauses for a day to remind itself about the nature of our God.

And what it says is that God is Three.

¹Anita Gates, "A Front-line Soldier in the Culture Wars Lobs Grenades," *The New York Times*. I cannot remember the date.

The word 'Trinity' never appears in the Bible. In fact, the concept is never explained or elucidated, but rather alluded to obliquely. It sort of pops up here and there out of nowhere and without warning. For instance at the beginning and the end of the Bible.

The first words of the Bible: "In the beginning **God**... It was The Ancient One who struck the match which exploded an infinitesimal singularity into a universe 540 sextillion miles across. That's 54 with 22 zeroes.

And then...when there was only darkness, when it was "blacker than a hundred midnights down in a cypress swamp"²...when the universe was a formless void, a shapeless sludge, a gooey quagmire, a **Wind** from God brooded over the face of the deep. A **Wind** from God, God's **Spirit**, God's **Breath**, God's **Ruach**, God's very **Life**, brooded over the face of the deep.

And **THEN**...God **said**...God **spoke**... God **declaimed**..."Let there be light. And there was light." "Then God smiled, and the darkness rolled up on one side, and the light stood shining on the other..." God's **Word** made it all happen. "In the beginning was the **WORD**, and the **WORD** was with God, and the **WORD** was God.

Can you hear the primordial, rudimentary concept of the Trinity whispered out from this vocabulary? Wellspring, Wind, and Word. Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. The threefold nature of the deity. It's not explained. It's just there. We weren't looking for it.

The Bible ends the same way it began, with that same whispered, cryptic Threeness: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, The One Who Is, and Who Was, Who Is to come."

The One Who **WAS**: Wellspring.
The One Who **IS**: Word.
The One Who **Is to Come**: Wind.
Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

I don't know what you think about the concept of the Trinity. I don't know whether the Threeness of God enhances and enriches your image of the Deity. The Trinity is sort of like Donald Trump: either you kneel at his feet or you want to run away screaming.

The Business Manager at my church in Connecticut was almost as smart as John Sharp. Not quite, but almost. He wasn't as **nice** as John; he was a crotchety old cuss who was always yawping about something.

But I couldn't have done anything in Greenwich without him. He was the right hand of the King. He helped me tear down our whole church and start over.

Did you know that John Sharp is a CPA? So was Don in Greenwich. Can you believe that? There and here, we had, have, a CPA running the place for us—a tiny little non-profit with a \$2 million budget. God is so good.

Anyway, Don Hibbard was a fairly accomplished theologian. He was always thinking about God. Just like John. Don was a preacher's kid. I love preacher's kids; I have two of my own. Don's father had been a fundamentalist Baptist preacher, and Don felt that he had been a little "overchurched" in his childhood.

For some reason Don and I got to talking about the Trinity one day, and Don said he thought the doctrine of the Trinity was—and I quote—"Scholarly BS." And when Don said, "Scholarly BS," he didn't use the abbreviation.

"This God thing is too simple. We have to keep it more complicated so that we'll always have jobs."

²James Weldon Johnson, "The Creation."

Don told me—and I quote once again: “The doctrine of the Trinity is for people whose minds are too small for God. Their imaginations can’t quite grasp a vast Deity that could create all of this, so they partition God into smaller, convenient packages like Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.” It was like the Theologians Union got together in the fourth century and said amongst themselves: “This God thing is too simple. We have to keep it more complicated so that we’ll always have jobs. Yeah, that it! Job security.” You can see why I loved Don so much.

So I don’t know how you feel about this way of thinking about God, but you have to admit, this way of thinking about God sure has lasting power. That passage from Genesis I read a moment ago is 2,600 years old; it was written 600 years before Jesus. And the Christian Church still thinks about God in exactly this way.

John Haught teaches cosmology and evolutionary biology at Georgetown University. He’s written books called *God after Darwin* and *God after Einstein*.

This summer, Katie, Christine, and I will preach this sermon series called *God after Darwin, God after Einstein, God after Copernicus, God after Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Skynet*.

We’ll be looking at the way all these advancements in science and technology have kind of hammered traditional Christian theology and driven it into a corner. As a result, Christianity has had to change a lot in the last 500 years.

But one thing hasn’t changed. We still think about God as three-in-one, and one-in-three. Wellspring, Wind, and Word. Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

You know who Francis Collins is, don’t you? Dr. Collins was one of the geneticists who decoded the Human Genome, then directed the National Institutes of Health for over ten years, now he’s Science Advisor to President Biden—I didn’t know this before yesterday—earned his legendary reputation as a Professor at the University of Michigan in the 80’s.

For most of his life, Dr. Collins was an avid atheist. He thought religion was not just stupid, but dangerous. He even admits to being a little obnoxious about it. But Dr. Collins was also just that—a doctor, a physician. He cared for his own patients.

One time he was caring for a charming older woman who was terminal with an untreatable heart condition. She accepted her fate with admirable equanimity. She asked Dr. Collins what he believed. He didn’t know. He was embarrassed.

So he starts thinking about God. Dr. Collins’ wife Mary Lynn was a good Methodist. One day Dr. Collins walks down the street and knocks on the door of her pastor Sam McMillan with some questions about

God. He invites the Reverend McMillan to play golf. So they’re out there talking about God the whole 18 holes. Dr. Collins admits to the Reverend McMillan, “Sam, I would have to get a lobotomy before I entered the door of your church.”

Sam introduces Dr. Collins to C. S. Lewis, especially *Mere Christianity*. Sam also pulls out his scorecard and writes a covenant on it. “Francis,” he says, “I want you to take this covenant, and if you ever find yourself believing in God, I want you to sign it and send it back to me.”

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Several months go by. Then one day, Dr. Collins calls Sam and tells him that he's just returned from a hiking trip in the Cascades on the West Coast. "Sam," he says, "I turned a corner, and there it was—a stunning frozen waterfall—divided into three, perfect, symmetrical parts. It must mean the Trinity, right?" Dr. Collins signs the golf card. He's been a devout Christian ever since.³

³Slightly adapted from Peter J. Boyer, "The Covenant," *The New Yorker*, September 6, 2010, 62–63.

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KENILWORTH UNION CHURCH
211 Kenilworth Avenue, Kenilworth Illinois 60043
847-251-4272 | kuc.org
facebook.com/kenilworthunionchurch