

Rev. Lynne Ogren
May 30, 2021

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
Holy Trinity Sunday, Year B John 3:1-17

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Well, here we are. We have had a beautiful six years of ministry together. And I want you to know that I will be eternally grateful for my time with Zion Lutheran Church. As much leadership experience as I had prior to my time here, it was you who walked with me as I learned what it means to be a pastor—a leader, a shepherd, a companion with you as God’s people. I couldn’t have expected or asked for a more generous and supportive setting for my first call. Thank you.

But this sermon isn’t about me! Today we gather to celebrate the fullness of God in our midst. This Sunday after Pentecost is called Holy Trinity Sunday because the Trinity is the teaching the early church fathers came up with to help us BEGIN to get a GLIMPSE of the mysterious and wonder-filled nature of God.

If you’ve been through confirmation classes or attended years of Holy Trinity Sunday worship services, you know that we teach that God is One God in three persons—one in three, three in one. Images like a rope with three strands or an apple with skin, flesh, and core or the three forms of water—ice, liquid, steam—all fall short of expressing the three persons of the Trinity.

In Scripture, we can find references to the three persons—Jesus, the Son, prays to God the Father, and promises to send the Holy Spirit who will be both his Spirit and comes from heaven serving as God’s spirit. But there are passages where it is difficult to discern which of the three or if two or more of God’s “persons” are at work, especially in the Old Testament.

Like Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night, this teaching can be confusing if we think about it too hard. Holy Trinity Sunday reminds us that God is bigger than what we can imagine, being as mighty and powerful as gracious and intimate. There are times when, like Isaiah, we feel small and unworthy in God’s presence—unworthy of love or forgiveness or insignificant in our abilities to do or be what God is calling us to do or to be.

Over the past few weeks, I have asked for stories from you about how you have experienced the power and presence of God, especially in the midst of this congregation. Thank you to those who submitted your stories. I know it’s a challenge to identify God’s activity in any given situation, but I think it’s an important practice.

The stories I received fall into three categories—welcome, community, and prayer. And you will see that, just as the three persons of the Holy Trinity overlap and live within and among one another, the same is true of these stories. There is a sense of welcome and community and prayer in all of them.

Sharon Nordahl tells about how warmly she was welcomed when she first arrived about ten years ago. She was greeted by Emma Peterson that first Sunday morning who introduced her to others. They immediately invited her to come to quilting and the Lyngblomsten Circle for Bible study. Betty Osterholm served as Sharon’s new member

sponsor and Margaret Durham invited her to dinner many times. All of these women found something in common with one another and gladly opened their arms to someone new.

And, as Sharon pointed out, Emma and Betty have moved to St. John's in Billings and Margaret is no longer with us. But the Holy Spirit that gifted them with God's hospitality lives on in others of you who continue to welcome those who seek God here.

Annette Fjeldheim recalled the time she moved back to Lewistown and returned to Zion, her childhood congregation. As Annette faced a future of raising her kids as a single parent and trying to start over with her own life and work, she was surrounded by families whose kids were of similar ages. She wrote that worship every Sunday was where she heard God's Word for her, and gave her a safe place to let go of the larger worries of her life, even for just that hour. Over the years Annette grew in faith through teaching Sunday School, serving on Church Council, and, more recently, through training and serving as a Stephen Minister.

Others told of the power of God's presence in Christian community. I'd like to read Debby Shobe's experience in full.

"I've always felt blessed to be able to work with the young people of Zion. The kids of our church have heightened my God awareness in ways I certainly did never expect. Spending time for around 33 years, first with preschool music, Sunday School, and then with Rainbow Choir, I STILL have to do my homework to teach Bible stories because I know there will be questions! The songs we sing become more meaningful, for me as well as for them, when we delve into what the words really mean.

"What continues to surprise, delight, and yes, inspire me is the honesty that shines through when the kids talk about 'God stuff'. (And we do talk—don't think I could keep 'em singing for 1-1/2 hours every Wednesday!) What a thrill when a kid's face lights up with a freshly-realized epiphany, an insight from our discussion time.

"That joy is palpable and unforgettable and makes me glad that I'm blessed to be allowed to have these young people in my life. Yes, because of them, I have developed a God awareness of my own. And I like to think that the feelings of trust and acceptance and love and safety that we share will be remembered well beyond sixth grade."

Thank you, Debby, for your dedication to the children of Zion! We can see God's work through you AND to you in the blessing of our kids!

Rebecca Lodman wrote about growing up in this church, and how meaningful it was for her to be involved with the choir. Vicky Thune and Roger Woltermann (a.k.a. Psalty the Singing Songbook!) were key leaders in her life. Rebecca had a bumpy start to life, and she names her grandparents who adopted her and brought her here as the keys to turning her life in a new direction, and she sees God's hand in all of that.

And then there are the prayer stories. As our Faithful Innovations teams has recently discovered, people are most often aware of God's presence in times of struggle and pain. These are the times when we cry out to God for help, because we know we are powerless to help ourselves.

Lloyd McKenna told of the time his daughter Becky was missing for a few days. I remember that week, and we were having Wednesday worship services at the time. I have a vivid picture in my mind of Lloyd and Meryl and me standing in the aisle at the back of the sanctuary praying for Becky's safety and her return home.

We all know how difficult it is to think straight when we are in the midst of a crisis. Lloyd wrote, "I am sure that the fog-like state of mind that I was in was the Holy Spirit surrounding and protecting me from the worst of the situation." I haven't thought about the Spirit working in that way before, but it makes some sense!

Teresa Stokken also knows the power of having a community lifting up one another in prayer. She wrote, "I knew [Zion was] a caring and welcoming church, but didn't know how much so until I was diagnosed with cancer. I was terrified when I got my diagnosis and dreaded chemotherapy and radiation. As my treatment progressed, I began to feel a sense of peace. I knew I was being prayed for and that gave me such strength and hope. I know I came through it because of the love and prayers of my Zion family."

Teresa now shares what she learned through her cancer journey with those she serves as a Stephen Minister.

Starla Solberg has a beautiful story she calls "The Praying Grandmas". When her kids were babies and toddlers, Starla participated in one of the women's circles. Scot, her youngest, was raised at the feet of these women from infancy through his preschool years. And even though he was busy with his toys, he was paying attention.

She wrote, "When [Scot] was about 4 years old, my brother experienced a very serious health situation. He had just divulged the seriousness to our family. I was shocked and in tears, when my 4-year-old walked up to me, tugged at my shoulder and said, 'It's okay Mom. We will just call our praying Grandmas.'"

Here again, the welcome of a young mother and her busy babies into their circle, the community they formed together, and the power of prayer they shared together, were the ways God was present in them and among them.

I'd like to close with the piece Roger Woltermann sent to me—our beloved Lay Pastoral Associate. He has read a sermon or two of mine when I've been in a pinch, and now I'd like to read one of his.

"In a line from the song by the Young Rascals (1967), "In a world that is constantly changing, how can I be sure", we are reminded just how inconsistent life is. Whether it's the ups and downs of family and friends, the pandemic, our health, our church, we search for consistency. We look back to how "things used to be". We wish too much, move or live too little.

"As you know," Roger writes, "I am a bit of a major league baseball "junky". I like to play fantasy baseball on the internet, claiming it keeps me current with teams and players. For some, it would rank right up there with watching paint dry, but for me, it's fun! To win at fantasy baseball, you must have good hitters and good pitchers.

"I cannot tell you how many times I have said, "If my hitters and pitchers were only more consistent, I would win more weekly matchups." If my hitters could only manage to get a hit once in three at-bats, their average would be .333. (That's a really good average.)

If my pitchers could allow fewer runs per innings, say an ERA of less than 2.00, what a wonderful fantasy world it would be!

"Bottomline, consistency is the key. How often I plead with my players, "If only you could be more consistent!" Sure, some days they are better than others, but to be totally consistent, it never happens!

"With consistency, being a Steady Freddy comes to mind. Whether it's Freddy Freeman from baseball, my Uncle Freddy, or my dear brother in Christ, Jim "Freddy" Fredrickson, we strive daily to find consistency. But consistency in this crazy world—how does that work?

"I have found in my life, that the only consistency that I can ALWAYS count on is from GOD. He never changes, whether as Father, Son, or Holy Spirit, He is the same as he was yesterday, today, and tomorrow. And how is He consistent? For me, and many of you, God is consistent in his LOVE. A love that is unconditional, never-wavering, given as a gift, never-discriminatory or divided, and consistently PRESENT.

"God's assurance, in my life, always blessed, is seen in so many ways, in so many people. With the expression, 'God works in mysterious ways,' I like better, 'God works in WONDERFUL ways.' I will forever be touched and moved by Jesus' words in John 3:16, what Martin Luther called "Christianity in a nutshell".

"What assurance to know that God so loves his creation, this world and all us creatures in it, that He gave his only Son, Jesus, and if we believe in Him, we will inherit eternal life. All He asks is that we simply believe, have faith, and bask in His love.

"When I find myself feeling separated from God because of life's struggles, I love to read Romans 8, especially verses 38 and 39, 'nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.' What more assurance do I need than that? And with all of God's people, I say AMEN!"

Thank you, Roger. And thank you, Zion Lutheran Church, for serving as God's welcome, God's community, and as a vessel for prayer for those who are lost and hurting. You have many strengths that you share so generously, all that come as gifts to you from God.

As you move into a new chapter in your life together, know that God has blessed me through you, and that God—Father, Son, and Spirit—will be with you to carry that blessing forward with new people and new experiences.

Thanks be to God! Amen

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Let us come before the triune God in prayer.

We pray, O God, for your holy church around the world. Revitalize and renew us, that we may be reborn once again through the waters of baptism and the blowing wind of your Spirit. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

We give you thanks for your power revealed to us in creation; for cedar and fir trees, for the rushing waters of Big Spring Creek and the Missouri River, for the echoes of thunder and the refreshment of rain and snow. Bless all creatures, and sustain them by your bounty.

Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

We pray for the nations and our leaders, especially for Israel and Palestine, for Afghanistan and Syria, and for communities in the United States where there is conflict and unrest. Led by your Spirit, may leaders and citizens alike work towards a world where all of your children enjoy peace. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

We pray for healing for all those who suffer in body, mind, or spirit. Bring hope, healing, and relief, especially to those listed in our bulletin and others we name now in our hearts.

Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

We pray for this worshipping community, Zion Lutheran Church, that the splendor of your majesty and the holiness of your mystery may be glorified through our worship and our relationships with one another. Guide them through this time of transition and prepare them for their next called pastor, just as you are preparing someone to come and love and serve them. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

We give you thanks, O God, for those who have died in the faith. We remember especially this Memorial Day weekend those whose lives have been lost due to the horrors of war. We name these loved ones before you now. *Wait*

Make us grateful for their sacrifice, and inspire our efforts to serve as you blessing to the world. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

We lift our prayers to you, O God, trusting in your abiding grace.

Amen.