

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

It's appropriate today to begin our sermon in this name. Today is the Festival of the Holy Trinity. But invoking this trinitarian name is not unusual for us. Sunday in and Sunday out we gather in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; we confess Him; we worship Him; we pray to Him; we are blessed by Him.

As we confessed today in the Athanasian Creed, acknowledging the eternal Trinity is part of “the catholic faith” ... no, we're not talking about Roman Catholic. I know Dr. Voelz doesn't like us to use that word — catholic — but we're simply talking about what is universally Christian doctrine. It is “*the faith once for all delivered to the saints*” (Jude 3), the *fides quae creditur*, the content of the Bible's teaching. You cannot reject this doctrine and call yourself a Christian. The Athanasian Creed puts it a bit more starkly: “Whoever does not keep it whole and undefiled will without doubt perish eternally.”

The teaching of the Holy Trinity is not the totality of the catholic faith, but it does take up a significant part of the Athanasian Creed. The other part of this creed acknowledges the Son, His eternal divinity, His incarnation, His suffering and death. All three of the creeds we use — the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian — confess the Holy Trinity; all three confess who Jesus is and what He did.

This is the language of the Athanasian Creed we just confessed together: we “hold” this faith; we “keep” this faith; we “worship” the God revealed in this faith; we “believe” this revelation; we “believe and confess” it; we “believe it faithfully and firmly”. We are called even to “think about the Trinity” in this way; but we do not say that we understand Him. No, we have before us on this Sunday the greatest mystery of the Church. We have the Bible's teaching on the Holy Trinity.

This teaching is not merely the confession of a god. We don't need the Bible for that. Indeed, anyone who denies there's a god rejects what his own eyes testify to. David penned: “*The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork*” (Ps. 19:1). The vast universe around us is a witness to God's almighty power, for who can do such a thing? Remember how God chided Job? “*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy*” (Job. 38:5-7)? The apostle Paul said it this way: “*what can be known about God is plain to [men], because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.*” We “*are without excuse*” (Rom. 1:19-20).

Interestingly, what was unheard of fifty years ago is today posited by some scientists ... that the universe and life are not just chance occurrences, that the complexity of life is not due to an undirected, purposeless series of mutations from the simple to the complex. Life had a beginning; it is designed; and some even venture to call that designer God.

They posit as evidence the fact that the universe had a beginning. They observe the fact that with all of our searching there is no life except on Earth, which just happens to be in a “zone” that is conducive to life. The Earth is fine-tuned for life. And they observe the fact that all living things, even to the microscopic level, give the appearance of design. I used the word “appearance,” for one chief proponent of atheistic evolution, Richard Dawkins, says that very thing: that living things have the “appearance of being designed,” but it is an illusion, he says. We know, however, that it is not an illusion; we don’t just have the appearance of being designed; we have in fact been designed ... created ... by God, “the Maker of heaven and earth.”

But having a god or knowing that there is a god is not confessing the one true God as He is revealed in the Holy Scriptures. After all, Luther says: “whatever you set your heart on and put your trust in is truly your god” (Large Catechism, The First Commandment:3). That could be “money and possessions ... the most common idol on earth,” he says (LC, 1st, 6-7). Luther also asserts that someone who “trusts and boasts that he has great skill, prudence, power, favor, friendship, and honor also has a god” — himself, “not the true and only God” (LC, 1st, 10).

We are called to confess that “true and only God,” the God of “the catholic faith.” We are called to confess the God who reveals Himself in the pages of Holy Scripture, including in our gospel reading for today from St. John. For the God of revelation is not just a powerful creator; He is the God who is love (1 Jn 4:16), who redeems.

And so, I’ll begin at the end of our Gospel reading for today. *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”* The loving God revealed in the Bible seeks the salvation of the world, and so He gives His only Son. That is, the God that Jesus reveals here is a Father for He has a Son, sent from His own bosom (Jn 1:18), down from heaven to earth, into human flesh — the Son of Man. And He sends Him to save sinners.

Indeed, what would our end be if it were not for God’s intervention? We would perish ... eternally. But God gave His only Son to be lifted up in the midst of our wilderness filled with the fiery serpents that assail us. God’s Son was lifted up on a cross and gave up His life unto death for us, for our salvation, an atoning sacrifice for our sin. And as Israel of old looked to that serpent lifted up on the pole and was

saved, so the world, as we look to Jesus lifted up for us and believe in Him, is saved ... we will not perish but have everlasting life.

Which is where the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Holy Trinity, comes into the equation (though He has been there all along). The Spirit is “the Lord and giver of life” (Nicene Creed). The Spirit works faith when and where it pleases God (Augsburg Confession V). The Spirit makes us believers. After all, flesh gives birth to flesh; we are born in sin, condemned in our concupiscence. But the Spirit gives birth to spirit. To say that we’re the source of faith would be turning things upside down. The clay dare not say to the potter: “*He did not make me*” (Isa. 29:16).

God Himself gives us this gift of faith — God the Holy Spirit does. God the Holy Spirit moves us to say Jesus is Lord. God the Holy Spirit regenerates and renews the sinner dead in his trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1; Tit. 3:5; 1 Cor. 12:3). This conversion happens by the Holy Spirit. The unbeliever is given a rebirth, Jesus says, or perhaps better, a birth from above. That happens in Holy Baptism, or as Jesus says, it happens by being begotten of “*water and the Spirit.*” This birth by the Spirit makes believers — spirit-filled people who look to Jesus and receive the promise of everlasting life.

So, there we have it: God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We call Him the Holy Trinity knowing that “Trinity” is not a word you’ll find in the Bible ... but the teaching is there, as we see in John’s Gospel; as we hear from Peter’s mouth: “*This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing*”; as we hear from the prophet Isaiah, if you have ears to hear: “*one [seraphim] called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!’*” The Father holy, the Son holy, the Spirit holy, yet not three Holies but one Holy, just as we confessed in the Athanasian Creed: “the Father eternal, the Son eternal, the Holy Spirit eternal. And yet there are not three Eternals, but one Eternal.” And we confess similarly about our Uncreated, Infinite, Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He is one God and one Lord.

This is the God who saves: the Father who loves and gives His only Son; the beloved Son who takes on our flesh and willingly goes to the cross for us, rises, and now reigns; the Holy Spirit who proceeds from both, who bestows the grace the Son earned by His sacrifice. How can this be? How can the one God be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Three in One? It is a mystery above our understanding, the mystery of the Holy Trinity whom we believe and teach and confess and worship, about whom we sing: “*Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever! ... The LORD ... has become my salvation*” (Ps. 118:1, 14).

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