

Trinity Sunday, Year C
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St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
June 12, 2022
Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31
Psalm 8
Romans 5:1-5
John 16:12-15

A Finger Pointing at the Moon

Since I was a little kid, little kid, three or four, I have loved the moon.

Here are some fun facts to know and tell about Earth's moon:

- We call our moon "the Moon" because people didn't know other moons existed until 1610 when Galileo Galilei discovered four moons orbiting the planet Jupiter.
- Our Moon is Earth's only natural satellite. It's the fifth-largest moon among the 200+ other moons orbiting other planets in our solar system.
- The Moon's presence helps stabilize our planet's wobble and moderate our climate.
- It also causes tides, creating a rhythm that has guided humans for thousands and thousands of years.
- The Moon's distance from Earth is about 240,000 miles (385,000km), and apparently it is increasing by about a mile farther each year.
- The Moon has a very thin atmosphere called an exosphere which will not support our oxygen needs.
- The Moon's surface is cratered and full of pits from comets and asteroids impacting it over the millenia.
- And it was likely formed after a celestial body about the size of the planet Mars collided with Earth. So the moon, we think, is part of the detritus that resulted from that impact.
- At this moment, there are three robotic spacecraft under NASA's guidance exploring Earth's Moon.
- And Earth's Moon is the only place beyond Earth where human beings in human form have ever set foot.

These moon facts are fascinating, at least to me, but they are not why I love the moon. I love the moon for its beauty, its luster, its reliability, its guiding light.

During the years I lived in Japan I learned about the moon's significance in

Japanese cultures and Japanese religious traditions. It was there for the first time I encountered the Zen Buddhist saying which is translated lots of different ways by lots of different people.

One way to translate it is this: “I am not the moon: I am only a pointing finger (to the moon).”

Another way to translate it is, “All language is a finger pointing at the moon.”

Whichever way you translate it, the meaning is, essentially, no matter how beautifully, wonderfully, brilliantly we describe something, our description is exactly that: a description of the thing and never the thing itself.

As one person has put it, “All words are just fingers pointing to the moon, but don't accept the fingers as the moon. The moment you start clinging to the fingers, the descriptions – that's when you miss the moon.”

My finger or your finger held aloft and pointed in the direction of the moon may help another person standing near us also looking at the sky to see the moon. But we must never confuse our finger, our vision, our understanding with the moon to which we point.

Today is Trinity Sunday. It's a day on which many clergy prefer not to preach. For the most part, this is because it's really difficult to talk about and preach about the Holy Trinity without committing heresy, even when you're trying really hard not to, maybe especially then is when you wind up doing it.

However, if in preaching on Trinity Sunday a preacher is able to successfully avoid heresy and is able to provide an explanation or explication or some sort of doctrinal declamation about the Holy Trinity—if you do all that—the wonder and genius of the Trinity may be lost. Worse yet, the people listening may hear a feat of didactic reasoning and impressive explication and be left wondering what any of it means and why they should care about the Holy Trinity, just as you may be wondering why I began today with all those fascinating moon facts.

All the words and all the images, including a number of analogies, that have been used to explain how God is Three in One and One in Three, the Trinity, the Unity: most of them fall far short. And using them can actually lead us into some of the most egregious heresies of all.

One popular analogy is to say the Trinity is like water which can be in three forms:

solid, liquid, and gas (but is always water). We kind of understand that, but that's not the Trinity because the Trinity is all three all at once never passing back and forth between them.

A less popular but recently a metaphor I've heard fairly often is to describe the Trinity as an egg, a chicken egg, saying, well, an egg has three parts: the yellow, the white, and the shell. Three parts, at least, right? But this analogy doesn't work either because you have to have all three of those things to have an egg, and each of the three persons of the Trinity is entire and complete in and of itself.

You may have also heard that St Patrick as a missionary to Ireland used a three-leafed shamrock to try and help the Irish people understand this mystery of the Trinity that he was so taken with and wanted to convey to them. All of these fall short, one way or another, some in multiple ways.

I myself generally take comfort in the words of St Augustine of Hippo who said: "If you do not believe in the Holy Trinity, you may lose your soul. If you try to understand the Holy Trinity, you will lose your mind." So, he kind of puts it where some of us feel we approach: bring it to a certain point and then, *And what is it? And why do I care?*

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Our readings today sort of help us and sort of don't. The reading from Proverbs describes Holy Wisdom, which is a name some folks invoke as a name for the Holy Spirit. Proverbs of course is a pre-Christian text and doesn't seem to actually be talking about the Holy Spirit. The passage we've heard this morning states that Holy Wisdom, though the first thing created, was in fact created. But the Holy Spirit, like the Father, like the Son, uncreated, pre-existent, from before time.

The reading from Romans, a little more to the point, maybe a little bit more helpful for Trinity Sunday. It begins, "We have peace with God (Creator, Father) through our Lord Jesus Christ." Then he explains to us how we develop and maintain hope. And then at the end he says, "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." Nicely done, St Paul. Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

Today's gospel doesn't really help us understand the Trinity, but it does offer us some comfort if we are perplexed. On the night before he dies, Jesus tells the disciples they won't be able to understand everything. They won't be able to take it all in, and he knows that. And that's why he promises he will send the Holy Spirit

to guide them into all truth. But, even so, not all the truth at one time but bit by bit as they are able to receive it.

So, we could join the ranks of those who have tried to figure out the Holy Trinity or explain it or explain it away or just blithely sum it all up with one of these analogies and say, "That's that." But the truth is, in doing any of that or all of that, we wouldn't actually be describing God. Certainly, we would not be describing God in the fullness and mystery and complexity and astonishing love that is the Holy Trinity.

So, I say let's not try to explain the Trinity, and let's certainly not try to explain it away.

I'll go this way instead.

Since I was a little kid, I have loved the moon. And the reasons I have loved it all my life are not because of all the interesting facts that one can learn about it and recite to others, including in a sermon. The reasons I love the moon are more poetic and existential and personal and breathtaking.

When I was twenty-one under the fullest, brightest, biggest moon I had ever seen up till then, I waded across a lagoon in Liberia, West Africa in water that came as high as my chest. And I carried a little kid about five or six on my shoulders. We made our way under that brilliant moonlight across this lagoon that none of us, including the people who lived there all the time, had ever been across during high tide. And we emerged from that lagoon and went out onto the beach, the Atlantic beach on the other side. And there under that glorious moonlight we saw all kinds of crabs and other critters running around, and we ran around some as well. It was a wonderful night guided and facilitated by moonlight. Now, I cannot tell you the names of any of those people that I walked across that lagoon with and emerged on that beach with. And I can't even tell you the name of that little kid whom I carried on my shoulders. But what do I remember? The glorious moonlight, the sense of community and connection, of sharing the wonder, the brilliance, the guidance of that mysterious moonlight.

Since moving to Key West, one of my most favorite things is watching the phases of the moon from various places on this island, through palm leaves and fronds in the rectory yard on Riviera Drive. Some nights on the way back from the church campus, I just stop and stand on Higgs Beach glorying in the wonder and beauty of the moon. The moon is lovely and cyclical and yet still somehow still unpredictable, always changing in our point of view and therefor somehow always

new.

One of the earliest verses I committed to memory perhaps even earlier than a Bible verse was this one, which I learned from my Mom, standing next to her looking up at the moon. Maybe you know it.

“I see the moon, and the moon sees me.
God bless the moon, and God bless me.”

I was three or four years old. I didn't know what all of that meant. But I knew I was connected to my Mom, and in her presence I was connected to that glorious sight in the sky, the beautiful full moon. I have always loved the moon because I have experienced it in its beauty—not its fullness but some of its luster. I have been in relationship to it all my life; and it has been a part of my relationships with others, starting with that first relationship with my Mom.

I love the Holy Trinity as well. And really for the same reasons. I have experienced it not in its fullness but in its beauty and power and grandeur, in various ways at various times. I have been in relationship to it my entire life; and it has been an inherent part of my relationships with others.

The good news of Trinity Sunday is that the same God who created you is the same God who redeemed and is redeeming you and is the same God who accompanies and guides you every day exactly where you are and as you are. God in three persons: Blessed Trinity. Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.

We need not try to explain the Trinity or to explain it away. Rather, we place ourselves in the arms of the God, the Triune God, that is Love: the Love that created us, has redeemed and is redeeming us, and the Love that sustains us. And in those loving arms of Love, capital L, we ask to be carried further and further into the mystery that is the Blessed and Most Holy Trinity.

I close with these words from a medieval mystic, Meister Eckhart:

“God is not what you think, or even what you believe, because God is a word unspoken, a thought unthought, a belief unbelieved. So, if you wish to know this God, practice wonder, do (what is) good, and cultivate silence. The rest will follow.”