May 27, 2018 - Annunciation Episcopal Church - Trinity Sunday

Rev. Elizabeth Molitors

Two weeks ago we celebrated rogation Sunday, and went home with little baggies full of rich, dark soil - a tangible reminder that we are part of the earth, and dependent on it. Last Sunday, we celebrated Pentecost, and heard the story of how the in-rushing of the Holy Spirit gave the disciples the power to go out and proclaim God's Good News to all the world. Now, this week, it's Trinity Sunday - the one feast of the church year which isn't about an action or a moment in time, but about a concept, a doctrine. The hard-to-describe and wrap-your-head-around idea of three expressions, three aspects, three persons - all completely different and independent - but still one, one God. It's a bit of a shock to the system to go from running your fingers through the crumbly soil of Rogation Sunday to feeling the breeze and fire of the Holy Spirit to, today, engaging in this mind exercise of contemplating Trinitarian theology.

I've spent a good deal of time reading, both during seminary and since then, essays and tomes that attempt to nail down this jello-wiggly bit of theology, most of which leaves you scratching your head as much as Nicodemus did when talking with Jesus.

But, the more that I think about the Trinity - the three embodiments of one God - I realize that maybe we're doing God, and ourselves, a dis-service by making the celebration of the Trinity such a heady exercise. It seems to me that the thing that these three aspects of God have in common is that they are three ways of God trying desperately to know and be with us. God in creation, God in the person of Jesus, walking and talking and living and eating with us, and God in the form of wind and fire. The God of creation made us as flesh and blood - not as concepts - and ever since that moment when humanity came into being, God has been trying to connect with us, in real, tangible ways. Our creatureliness is not a barrier to a relationship with God, but the foundation and substance of it.

Over the past two Sundays, we read from Psalm 104, one of the richest psalms in terms of creation imagery, talking about creatures both great and small, too many to number, including an enormous sea creature, the leviathan, which, the psalm says, God made just for the sport of it. The earth is full of your creatures, the psalmist says. By which the psalm's author means not just the storks and wild goats and young lions, but us. We are creatures, too. It's easy to forget that, though, surrounded as we are by tools and technologies and

practices that allow us, for a time, to transcend our finitude, to feel powerful, independent, and invincible, not bound to the earth, nor limited by its mysteries or seasons. We fly in jet planes, tap into oil and gas reserves deep underground, consume medicines that extend our lives, purchase strawberries at the grocery store that came into being on plants half a world away. It's easy to forget that we are as much a part of the natural order as the lilies of the field or birds of the air that Matthew's gospel says God knows, looks out for and watches over.

We forget - except, perhaps, when we're faced with some natural phenomenon that demands our attention. A tornado; a hurricane; a volcanic eruption. By now, I'm sure you've all seen images from Hawaii, of the lava flows coming from the volcano, Kilauea, that began erupting about a month ago. My heart aches for the people who've lost their homes and belongings, whose lives have been so disrupted, even as I'm fascinated to watch the oozing black and orange lava that steadily and inexorably lays waste to anything in its way - trees and underbrush, cars and houses. Nothing human-made is a match for this force of nature; non-human-made stuff doesn't stand much of a chance, either, and the other parts of nature bow to the power of the lava, as well.

We're reminded of our creatureliness, too, when our bodies fail us - when disease or sickness or physical infirmity or the reality of aging stands in the way of our doing what we've long taken for granted we should be able to do. A couple of weeks ago, I went to my parents' home for a visit, and observed how like the volcanic lava of Kiluaea is my mother's Alzheimer's. A force of nature, unstoppable, laying waste to memory and executive function.

But for all that we try to deny or rage against it, still we are enjoined to remember that we are no more in control of our tomorrows than are the field-bound lilies or the airborne birds, and so we might as well relax into it, and enjoy, or at least try to appreciate, what it means to dwell just here, and just now, in common cause with all of the earth's other creatures that God has made. Absent a comforting illusion of control, the here and now can be a place of dis-ease, discomfort, or fear, but it's almost always a rich place.

I stumbled across an article, recently, by a woman who told the story of a flight she'd taken out of New York. She was heading home after a conference. It had been a worthwhile conference, enjoyable even, but it was too much - too much talking, too much needing to work the room - and now the woman was

looking forward to flying, relaxed and alone and undisturbed, kept company only by her magazine and her own thoughts.

In the airport ticketing area she saw them, an elderly couple, worn and disheveled, looking like they hadn't bathed or changed clothes in days. The wife in a wheelchair, who seemed agitated every time her husband passed out of sight. The woman muttered something less-than-charitable under her breath, happy that whatever complicated story those two were living out, she didn't have to be a part of it. She looked away from their drama, and made her way to the gate.

At the gate, she learned that she'd be the last person to board, and wouldn't you know it, the only seat left on the whole flight was next to *that* couple, in a row right up front, the one where there aren't any tray tables or under-seat storage, and no space to put your carry-on bag on the floor, so her magazine got carried off and tucked into a far away overhead bin. She was feeling aggrieved.

As soon as she took her seat, the husband - seated in the middle - began to encroach on her space by the window. The wife, who was sitting on the aisle, kept trying to put her feet across her husband, forcing him to lean back into the stranger's seat. Eventually, once the flight was underway, the husband got up to use the restroom, leaving his wife and the woman. Soon, the wife attempted to stretch out over all three seats, and ended up with her head in this stranger's lap. The woman explains, in her article, that she finally softened, allowed her maternal instincts to kick in, and took the wife into her care. Her annoyance at losing control over her plans faded away. She was completely there, completely now.

The husband returned, surprised at the sight. He offered an explanation. He said that his wife had had a stroke the year before. Where once she'd worked as an engineer, cared for their house, and made all their meals, now she was left with the behavior and cognitive capacity of a young child. Though the wife could no longer "sow nor reap nor gather into barns" yet God found a way - through her husband and this stranger - to care for her.

[http://www.mbird.com/2018/05/mockingbird-nyc-all-such-good-works/]

The call to trust in God, to be more like other of God's creatures and not to worry about your life, to not obsess and grasp for control, ends up being not so much an action we are to take as it is the natural consequence of having lived an intimate, inter-connected, inter-dependent life with neighbor and stranger. Once the woman on the plane let go of her attachment to her plans and her irritation at having her plans foiled, she was able to tap into her creatureliness and connect to her seat mate, attending to her needs and comfort. "So do not worry about tomorrow," Jesus said, "for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." The woman became sacrament to the wife - an outward, visible sign of God's presence - something she would never have been able to do had she been focused on controlling or getting out of the situation. Dwelling in the here and now is what allowed sacrament to happen.

The Episcopal priest and author, Barbara Brown Taylor, writes about this very thing:

The first thing [sacraments] teach us is that we do not worship God alone. We need other people in our lives to feed us and forgive us, to touch us and bless us and strengthen our resolve. There are no solo sacraments. We need one another.

The second thing sacraments teach us is that God uses material things to reach out to us. Sacramental worship is nothing less than worship of the God who is in our midst, present to us in bread and wine, water and oil, in hands and feet and kisses of peace. If, in touching or being touched by these ordinary things, we believe that we are being touched by God, then we can no longer draw a clear line between the sacred and the secular in our lives. Every created thing is a potential messenger, sent to teach us more about our relationship with God.

The third thing sacraments teach us is that God is not delicate. The sacraments of the church are not weekend performances in sacred settings; they are portable. The sacraments of the church may take place in prison cells, intensive care units, nursing homes, halfway houses, night shelters, AIDS clinics, and anywhere else the people of God decide to carry them, including corporate headquarters and the steps of city hall. No place that is human is too messy for God. The sacraments teach us to seek God's presence at all times and in all places. *[from The Preaching Life]*

There it is - all that we need to know about the Trinity. That God is present at all times, and in all places. Taking forms and showing up in ways we may least expect. In the soil of the earth, in the birds of the air; in rabbis and prophets; in wind and in fire. Even in a cramped row of airline seats. *Amen.*