

Welcome

Remember that scene in the Wizard of Oz where Dorothy and her friends meet Oz the Great and Powerful for the first time? He's a disembodied head, shouting at them while surrounded by fog and lightning. Dorothy and her friends are terrified, and agree to do Oz's bidding largely out of fear. Of course, at the end of the film, we learn that Oz the Great and Powerful is nothing but a literal smoke-screen hiding a wizened old man.

Once we see 'behind the curtain', the fear evaporates and we're left with pity and disappointment. This little old man doesn't have any power to do the things he promised.

Though the film didn't come out until the end of the 1930s, it was based on a book that was published in 1900. In that sense, the ending makes a lot of sense. The turn of the 20th century was one characterized by boundless optimism. The Wizard of Oz is a thinly veiled metaphor for religion - we think God is big and scary, but he turns out to be harmless and after all, we had the real power to actualize ourselves all along!

That optimism didn't survive WWI, so it's no surprise that in 1920, an author named Howard Phillips Lovecraft, published his first book of what would become known as 'cosmic horror'. (Lovecraft is super problematic - he's deeply racist, for instance. His horror fiction is also massively influential. You see it in everything from Stephen King to Jordan Peele's films - *Get Out* and the forthcoming *NOPE*.)

Lovecraft does the opposite of *Wizard of Oz*. When he pulls back the curtain, you don't find a silly old man. Rather, it's some sort of ancient, alien creature. In the wake of the most destructive, evil war the world has ever seen, Lovecraft imagined that what was at the heart of the universe was not some kindly, wizened old man but a vast, uncaring consciousness that couldn't care less about humans.

Which is pretty messed up.

I bring up *Wizard of Oz* and H. P. Lovecraft because they're two modern answers to an ancient question: what's the nature of the universe?

We've been asking that question since we had the ability to frame the thoughts, and until the last couple of hundred years or so, it's largely been the purview of religion. What is the nature of the universe?

Our Buddhist friends insist that what we call reality is an illusion, that if we can learn to empty ourselves and become nothing, we will find peace.

For Hindus, everything is an expression of the essential cosmic force. Our goal is to realize that all the ways we distinguish ourselves not just from one another, but from the world, are illusions.

Our Muslim friends believe that God created the world and that the human goal is to learn submission to God, in hopes that God will be merciful to us and welcome us into paradise.

Mormons believe we are God's biological children, that if we are faithful to God's way then we too will ascend to godhood and become lords of our own realities.

And what about Christians? Who do we understand God to be? What is the nature of the one at the heart of all things?

The theological word for our god is 'Trinity'. We believe God is three persons who are one being. A contradiction, a paradox, a mystery at the heart of the universe that invites us not to seek to understand, but to be known and loved.

Let me say that again as we move into worship: the Trinity is not a collection of facts to be learned, but a mysterious reality that invites us to be loved so that we may love.

Message

Today is Trinity Sunday, officially the last day of the Church year before we head into Ordinary Time. Moreover, this is an in-between week. We finished our re:Connected series last week on Pentecost, and we're not starting our series on *Encanto* until next week (more on that later).

What that means is we get a whole glorious week to explore the most important doctrine in Christianity: the Trinity. God exists eternally as three persons - Father, Son and Spirit - who are one being.

What makes me sad about talking about the Trinity is that we so easily give up on it. And I get it - God is three persons in one person. So Christians worship 3 gods? We're polytheists like our Muslim friends think? Nope. We worship one. God.

Oh so the three persons are expressions of the one God, sort of like I'm a husband, a son and a pastor? Nope. That's something called modalism, and it's a heresy the early church identified as a false and dangerous explanation of God's nature.

So which is it? Three or one? Here's the thing: it's *both*.

I know. That doesn't make sense. It's a contradiction. A paradox.

In the West, we don't like paradoxes (we're all Doc Brown from *Back to the Future*). So we try to explain it away. People try to talk about an egg - with a shell, white and yolk. Or a pie - crust, filling and, uh... fruit I guess? Also no.

The whole point of a paradox is that you can't understand it. It's, by definition, beyond understanding.

Which... if we're talking about God is a *good* thing, isn't it? Don't we want the all-powerful, all-knowing creator and judge of all things to be... better than us?

Ancient Near Eastern peoples like those first Christians *loved* paradox. They didn't see them as barriers to understanding, but invitations to experience the incomprehensible. Some things are so true, they can only exist beyond our understanding. They *have to be expressed as paradox*. Like Trinity.

So why is the Trinity good news for us? Well for starters, it makes sense out of some of the strange language we find Jesus using in the Gospels.

After all, the most essential belief of Judaism was that God is one, and that God is the only God. But then Jesus goes around claiming not only to be sent from God, but to *be* God, to be one with God.

You can hear the tension, right? How can there be one God if there are two who are God? And then, after Jesus ascended to the throne of heaven, we received the Holy Spirit, who also seemed to be God. So three but one? Starting to sound familiar?

Consider Matthew's last recorded words of Jesus, what has become known as the Great Commission:

Then the eleven disciples left for Galilee, going to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him—but some of them doubted!

Jesus came and told his disciples, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age." -- Matthew 28:16–20 (NLT)

Jesus tells us to go to 'all the nations' and make disciples, and baptize them in the name of 'the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.' That's some of the earliest Trinitarian language we have - the Gospel of Matthew dates from about 60 years after Jesus' resurrection. And you can see that, even there, Jesus doesn't explain what he means.

But for him, the Trinity is the heart of the faith. When we baptize, we are welcoming people into a faith that is marked by a God who is 3-in-1. This is what sets Christianity apart from every other religion. This is our defining doctrine, our hallmark, our signature. God is Father, Son and Spirit.

And what that means on a very practical level is that God is love. I know... that's a big jump from the paradox of trinity to God as love. But before we go on, let's sing another song celebrating our God together.

Break

Why does it matter that God is Trinity? And how is our confession that God is 3-in-1 relate to God as love? I want to go back to another of the lectionary texts for this week, from the prophet Hosea.

Turn with us to [Hosea 11](#).

One of the false images we have of God is that in the Hebrew Bible, God was angry and judgmental. But the Jewish people overwhelmingly understood God to be a God of love. Hosea is a great example of that. Set during a time in Jewish history when God's people were not faithful - not keeping the covenant, worshiping other gods and exploiting the marginalized, God doesn't present Godself as an angry, vindictive deity but rather a spurned lover who, despite his partner's betrayal, chases after them and wants to win them back.

In this brief passage, you can hear God's love for Israel, even as Israel is faithless:

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and I called my son out of Egypt. But the more I called to him, the farther he moved from me, offering sacrifices to the images of Baal and burning incense to idols.

I myself taught Israel how to walk, leading him along by the hand. But he doesn't know or even care that it was I who took care of him. I led Israel along with my ropes of kindness and love. I lifted the yoke from his neck, and I myself stooped to feed him. -- Hosea 11:1-4 (NLT)

Now, I hope you're thinking to yourself: "Wait, that sounds like a really unhealthy relationship. Israel is repeatedly unfaithful and God won't just let it go? If we have a friend whose partner is repeatedly unfaithful, we encourage them to cut it off. Otherwise, it can get abusive and co-dependent. Is that what's happening here?"

No. And this is where God-as-Trinity matters.

When we say that God is Love, what we're saying is that God is most essential one who gives oneself for the good of others (that's how Jesus defines love in [John 15](#)).

In order for God to be most fully Godself, God has to be giving Godself to the Other.

Which you can see in Hosea. No matter how Israel behaves, God continues to give to and provide for Israel.

But if God is only one, then that makes God dependent on Israel (or on the world at large). Because for God to be God, God has to give. And giving requires a receiver.

Which means if I choose not to receive God's gifts - as Israel is refusing in Hosea's time, then God can't be Godself. If God is one, and God is love, then God isn't free. God needs us. Needy relationships are bad. Needy deities are much worse.

But God is not only one. God is three. The Father gives eternally to the Son and the Spirit. The Son gives eternally to the Father and the Spirit. The Spirit gives eternally to the Father and the Son. And all three receive eternally from each other.

God is whole within godself. God doesn't need us. And that's really good news. Because it means God is free - free to love us without strings or conditions. God is free to forgive our faithlessness. God is free to invite us into the mysterious, eternal love of the Trinity.

Because God created us in God's own image. God created us with the capacity to participate in the Trinity's eternal love. God invites us to know God so that we can be known, to love God so we can love well.

When we say that God is love, we're making a statement about the nature of reality. We're saying that behind the curtain is not a helpless old man, but a paradox of love that is the source and goal of all creation.

When we say God is love, we're insisting that at the heart of existence is not a cold, indifferent intelligence but the one who created and knows and calls us.

Communion + Examen

When in the last week have I made a point to receive God's love for me?

What has kept me from receiving God's love in this last week?

How can I be intentional about receiving God's love this week?

Who is God inviting me to love this week?