

Carry-on Baggage Only
Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit

John _____

Opening

This is the story our people have always told on this day.

It was the festival of the harvest, a festival that they celebrated every year. The crowd had gathered to commemorate the covenant that God had made with their people a long time ago. They were prepared to celebrate in the same way they had known since they were children. In the crowd were the disciples of Jesus, who had come to worship in the old, familiar way...because even though Jesus had been here with them, now he was gone, and they were not sure whether anything had changed, really, at all.

So the day of Pentecost came, and they were all in one place.

And suddenly from heaven there came a sound they could only describe as the rush of a violent wind...and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Something that felt as hot and bright as fire suddenly appeared among them. It was like nothing they had ever seen before.

This is not what they came expecting to see. It was not the steady word of unchanging comfort they had come hoping to hear again. It was not what their religion had taught them. It was *out of their control*.

All of them—*all of them*—were filled with the Holy Spirit. They began to speak about the greatness of God, of hope for their broken world—with words they didn't even know they had inside of them.

And strangers, people who didn't know their traditional ways, people who had always felt outside, and excluded, and alone—foreigners, the poor, the mentally ill, the disabled, the gays, the ones who could not get a job—they heard words of hope addressed to them. They were amazed and astonished, and they said to themselves and to one another: How can this be? *They are speaking my language...*

And suddenly, everything was different. ...

O God, in your wisdom and love and kindness,
you have made yourself into what each one of us longs to find.
You speak in a tongue that each one of us needs to hear.
So one way or another, in all the forms you have offered to us,
help us to find you—

In the mountains and oceans of this creation.

in the radical words of a man who challenged empires...and who challenges us.
In that Spirit that stirs our hearts and jumbles our words.
In the struggles and blessings of our lives. Amen

We come to be reminded that we are part of something that is bigger than what we have made ourselves, bigger even than what we can understand fully. Something big enough to move us.

Message

John Wesley, the founder of our Methodist tradition, famously said,

In essentials [let there be] *unity*.
In non-essentials, [let it be] *liberty* [that holds us together.]
And in all things, [may there be] *charity* [love].

That's a beautiful, compelling thought, isn't it? That may be exactly the kind of free thinking that drew you to, or keeps you in, the Methodist church as a place to practice your faith. It's one of the things that distinguishes United Methodism from some other denominations, where members are required to subscribe to a common creed as a statement of their personal faith. We don't do that here. You may have noticed, this Sunday and last, that during this worship series, there's a different creed, a new affirmation of faith, inserted into your worship bulletin. These aren't official statements of the church. It's there simply as an offering to you, to give you an idea of how other people articulate what they believe. It's there to help you find your own theological voice, a statement of your own convictions.

But John Wesley left us with a bit of a dilemma. What *are* those essential beliefs that unify this group of people, who want to worship together, and live together in a common faith, and work toward the same vision of good in the world? What are the things that are important for us to stop and try to say clearly, out loud—not for the sake of 'right belief', or orthodoxy, but because naming them matters for us? Which of our convictions are so important, so much a part of our common identity, that what we say about them matters—no matter how hard it is to capture in words a truth that is big and beyond us, and mostly *un-namable*?

I want you to notice that this series of sermons lasts only four weeks. Because whatever those essential beliefs are, they need to fit in luggage that's small enough to carry with us everywhere.

Today I want to talk about God in three forms—an idea called the *Trinity* in theological language. God, Jesus Christ, Holy Spirit. Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost, in words people were more comfortable with a hundred years ago. The Trinity—which may feel to you like a concept that belongs in a suitcase like that, not particularly necessary to the faith you need all the time. In fact, the idea of the Trinity—one God in three persons—is, for many people, something that sounds like this conversation between Alice and the White Queen in Lewis Carroll's book *Through the Looking Glass*.

"I'm one hundred and one, five months and a day old." [the Queen says]
"I can't believe that!" said Alice.

"Can't you?" the Queen said in a pitying tone. "Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes."

Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said: "one can't believe impossible things." "I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

Maybe thinking about one God in three persons seems like it's asking you to believe six impossible things before breakfast too. But here's what I think might be true: that you are already carrying this belief around with you. That by naming the *Trinity* of God, three ways God shows up for us, we're not concocting some intricate theological impossibility; we're explaining something that is so obviously true, so already essential for your carry-on bag of beliefs, that you don't even think about it. Stay with me for a minute, and see what you think.

In the first couple of hundred years after Jesus lived and died, there were people who thought he was important enough, and different enough from anyone who had come before him, that no existing religion could hold this new way of understanding God, this different way of living as a spiritual person. But there were a few things they had to get clear on first. Like: Who *was* this person who lived and taught and healed, who died and then seemed to *live again*, and who clearly had some connection with God like no one else had? Was he something God created? Or sent? Was he God's relative? Was he God himself?

These were big questions. Important questions. Maybe the *most* important questions if they were to going to talk about a new Christian faith in a coherent way, a way that would hold the followers of Jesus together, and help them see that they were part of a movement larger than just the few people they knew and sang with on Sunday mornings. And so the leaders of that young, still-in-formation Church worked on coming up with the right words. Along the way they argued and debated. No doubt a few of them lobbied and probably paid people off; sometimes they killed each other. You know how these things go.

Finally, they decided that the best way to put a hard-to-talk-about idea into words was to talk about God 'in three persons'—Father, Son, Spirit. That's what we mean when we say the *Trinity* of God. The Greek word they used that has come to us as 'person' actually means something more like 'face'. This God they were talking about wasn't three separate people; it was God with three faces, three ways of showing up in human life, three ways of being recognized. Let me explain a little more, and see if this doesn't describe your experience too.

One face is the God who created the world. This is God infinitely large, always just beyond our holding onto fully. This is the God we talked about last Sunday—the God we often make smaller when we try to control our lives. This is the God that appeared to Moses in a burning bush. When Moses asked God to identify himself, God refused to be named. "I am who I am," God replied, as if to say, 'You will never know me entirely, the way you can know another person. I will always be a mystery to you.' This is the face of the God who chooses to love us, but whom we cannot control, the God who sometimes slips away from us. This is the God we see in a magnificent sunset, or when ocean waves pound on the beach; when are stunned by the

perfection of a baby's fingers. This picture of God reminds us of our smallness. Our relationship with this God—human to infinite—will always be mostly about awe.

But this grand Creator of the Universe, Love beyond Understanding. All Shall Be Well awesomeness is not the only way God has made himself accessible to us. There's Jesus, this human being who lived a little more than two thousand years ago. You don't have to be a Christian to believe that Jesus physically existed, or even to think of him as a role model. Many people—from other religions, or of no faith at all—admire Jesus' teachings, his kindness, the way he stood up for the poorest and most dis-counted people of his day, his willingness to die for what he believed in. What is essential about Christian belief is not that Jesus was good; it's that he showed us that God is good. In that living, breathing human body Jesus lived in, we see the qualities of God himself—what God looks like, what a human created in God's image can look like. Jesus is God with a human face. Maybe God in *every* human face.

We need that. Think about the contrast, for the earliest Christians, between a powerful God who bent down to become a baby, and the gods of Roman and Greek mythology, who were always throwing lightning around and using human puppets to demonstrate their vast power. It's different now. In our time, when our knowledge of science makes us feel more powerful, we need God-in-human-form for a different reason. The poet Christian Wiman says we need Jesus because left to our own devices, we can turn God into a sort of hazy concept, some vague comfort that will leave us alone whenever that works for us. To see and follow and serve Jesus Christ requires us to look through that fog to a reality of God that Wiman says can sometimes feel like 'a shard of glass in your gut'. This is the face of God that keeps turning us toward things we'd rather not see, people and needs and injustices in the world that demand our attention. Jesus, Wiman says, is God crying 'I am here. Look at me.'¹

And the third face of God is the hardest one to talk about, because this is God who shows up in each of us differently. An experience of God we can barely describe, except to say that once in a while it feels as if there is a fire burning inside of us, or something that moves us as invisibly as wind. This, we say, is the Holy Spirit. The same Holy Spirit who animated a new power inside Jesus' disciples on that first Pentecost day. The same Holy Spirit who can still move inside of you and me.

The Hebrew word for the Spirit is the same word that means 'breath'—literally a disturbance of the air. This is the presence of God you know in those moments when you are surprised by your own tears, or when your heart leans toward someone else's sorrow, or when you are stirred to a generosity that does not seem like you at all. The Spirit is what God looks like in motion now—always mending, connecting, warming the space that had grown cold, softening a heart that had grown hard.

Each of these three faces is a way God comes to us. Each of them is a way God extends himself toward us.

God the Creator—God for us.
Jesus the Christ—God alongside of us.

¹ Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*, p. 121

The Holy Spirit—God within us.

It's like *we* are the strangers who were there on that first Pentecost morning, when those disciples began to speak and everyone heard in a different language, their own language. Three faces of a God who wants so much to meet us and to be part of our lives, that God does the work of coming to us, in multiple ways.

Years ago, when faith was something very new to me, someone asked me “Are you a God person or a Jesus person?” I understood that question. I thought the question made sense. I even knew my answer. Today I think something different. Now I know that God is never just one thing. Richard Rohr calls the Trinity God's ‘divine dance,’ God's multi-faceted way of accomplishing what it is that God wants most—which is to be in connection—communion—with every creature on earth. With you.

Pack that thought carefully. And then put it in that very small carry-on bag you carry with you, everywhere you go.