

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Place a candle, clear bowl of water, and living plant in the midst of your group. Pray together the following images of the Trinity, which Elizabeth Johnson adapts from Tertullian's *Adversus Praxaes* in her book *She Who Is*.

LEADER 1: Let us imagine God as light. God, the source of all, is the sun. Jesus, who is God incarnate, is the same light streaming to earth, a sunbeam. Spirit is the point of light that arrives on earth as warmth and energy.

ALL: All one shining light.

LEADER 2: Let us imagine God as water. God, the source of all, is an upwelling spring. Jesus, God incarnate, is the river that flows outward from this source. The Spirit is the irrigation channel where the water meets and moistens the earth.

ALL: All one flowing water.

LEADER 3: Let us imagine God as a flowering plant with a deep invisible root, a green stem reaching into the world from that root, and a flower that spreads beauty, fragrance, and eventually seeds.

ALL: All one living plant.

Many Christians know and love the Trinity icon written by Andrei Rublev in the 15th century. The icon pictures the three visitors to the tent of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18. The visitors come to assure our ancestors in faith that Sarah will have a child, that

God will keep the promise that their descendants will bless all the families of earth. Abraham and Sarah extend hospitality, seat the visitors at a table, and serve a meal of flour cakes, milk, and veal.

Benedictine Sister Mary Charles McGough also wrote an icon of this scene. In both icons the three visitors, often identified as the Old Testament Trinity, sit in a circle that is open toward the viewer, inviting us into the circle to a seat at the table, inviting us into their relationship.

For a course I helped teach entitled "Heart of God," we purchased a large print icon of Mary Charles's icon for our class environment. I lived with the icon on my office wall for several weeks. One day I saw in the icon the same vision that brought me back to the Sisters of St. Joseph after 10 years away.

I had rented a grand apartment, the downstairs of a house with hardwood floors, big front windows, and bay windows in the dining room. I lived with four Sisters of St. Joseph while I readied the new space. They volunteered to make new curtains.

As I was unpacking, three of these sisters came over to hem

the curtains. They were long-time friends of one another. At one point their laughter made me look over my shoulder. The three of them sat with curtains on their laps, stitching happily and at the same time yucking it up and enjoying each other.

I saw the icon in them. Their love for each other had room for me. I saw a vision in their friendship of the kind of love I wanted to be a part of. Like the Trinity in the icon their love had room for another and another.

● What do you see in the Trinity icon?

● What does the icon help you see in your experience?



Artist: Mary Charles McGough, OSB

GOSPEL



Go and make disciples of all peoples.

NARRATOR: Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had appointed them. When they saw him, they fell down in homage; but some doubted. And Jesus came and spoke to them.

JESUS: All authority in heaven and on earth has been given

to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to observe all I have commanded you. Know that I am with you always to the end of the age.

Matthew 28.16-20

Jesus gives the Christian community a mission.

Amazingly, Sunday's gospel tells us that even as the eleven disciples pay Jesus homage, some entertain doubts. Their faith and trust in him do not take their doubts away. But in this final, climactic scene of the gospel, Jesus charges both those who worship him and those who doubt: Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the threefold name of the God they have come to know in their time with Jesus—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This baptismal formula, which we still use today, is very ancient, stretching back into the Church's earliest tradition and finding a place in the great commissioning that ends Matthew's gospel. The risen Jesus promises to be with the eleven in continuing his mission of baptizing and teaching his new law of love.

Christians follow Jesus' example in naming God in intimate, relational terms. As baptized Christians we follow Jesus in calling God Father; we claim kinship with God, creator and source. We claim Jesus as one of us, God's Son, redeemer and liberator. We live in the Spirit, the animating giver of life, the sustainer and sanctifier, who brings to fulfillment all that God has begun in creation and revealed in Jesus the Christ.

● What does baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit mean to you?

Christian faith in God as Trinity grows out of scripture. The Old Testament describes God as Creator and also the great *I Am* who hears the cry of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt and sends Moses to set them free.

The Spirit of God stirs the waters (Genesis 1.2). The Spirit speaks in prophets and will anoint the messiah with familiar gifts—"The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, counsel and strength, knowledge and awe" (Isaiah 11.2). The prophet Joel envisions God pouring out the Spirit on all flesh, sons and daughters, young and old (2.28). At Pentecost Christians experience Joel's prophecy fulfilled.

Each of the four gospels tells us the Spirit comes upon Jesus at his baptism. A voice from heaven affirms, "You are my beloved Son."

Jesus expresses his relationship with God as a father-son bond. He teaches us to pray, "Our Father." Jesus is put to death for claiming to be the Son of the Blessed One, the messiah.

● What does creation reveal about God?

● What does the incarnation reveal about God?

● What does the activity of the Holy Spirit in our lives reveal about God?

How can Christians baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit, and yet believe in one God? For two millennia theologians have sought to find words for this revelation in our holy history.

The Greek Church fathers from Cappadocia, especially St. Basil of Caesarea, developed

language for speaking about the Trinity that the Council of Nicaea affirmed in the Nicene Creed (AD 325).

John Zizioulas, an Orthodox theologian today, explores the roots of the word *person*, which we use to describe the Trinity as three persons in one God. To play their roles in Greek tragedies, actors wore masks called *prosepon* in Greek, *persona* in Latin.

Ancient Greeks believed fate rather than free will ruled their lives; their destinies were set. However, during a drama while the characters wore masks, the audience perceived them acting freely until ultimately fate caught up. Greek theologians used the word for mask, *persona*, to describe an individual acting freely.

As Christians, Greek theologians didn't believe in fate but like Jews believed God created freely out of nothing and made humans free in

God's own image. Out of these roots grew the concept of person, one able to relate freely, able to love. God is a communion of persons, three in one love.

St. Thomas Aquinas in the AD 1200s understood God as Pure Act of Be-ing, in which to be, to know, and to love perfectly coincide. The Father generates the Son; in the generation of the Word, God knows Godself; in the procession of the Holy Spirit, God loves Godself.

Our heads start to hurt with these efforts to think about God, whom we experience as close as we are to ourselves but beyond the adequacy of our words. Importantly the Trinity is a communion of equals, not a monarchy, giving us community and mutual love as models of how to live on earth as in heaven.

● **What is at stake in trying to understand God as a communion of equals?**

Our God is no smug solitary being enclosed in egocentric self-regard but the living God, three persons in free communion, always going forth in love and receiving love. Our Judeo-Christian traditions testify that our God is irrepressibly friendly, steadfast, faithful, and compassionate toward us.

Three is one more than two, the starting point for social life, notes Brazilian theologian Ivone Gebara. A pregnancy calls married couples to make room in their relationship for another. Gebara grounds her reflection on the Trinity in our human experience of being diverse and multiple but one in origin and being.

As human persons we live in relationships that like molecules with a positive valence stay dynamically open to other bonds. In the social interaction at the heart of our thriving, we experience the dynamic at the irrepressibly generative, life-giving, love-outpouring heart of God.

“Being in communion constitutes God's very essence—mutual love, love from love, unoriginate love,” writes contemporary theologian Elizabeth Johnson in her book *She Who Is*. The Spirit is mutual love, the Son is love from love, the Father is unoriginate love.

● **How do you address God in prayer?**

● **How do you experience God—within yourself, in relationships with others, in creation, in scripture?**



We Catholics bless ourselves with holy water when we enter a Church. The Sign of the Cross reminds us we are baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

This is why Israel must keep the covenant.

Sunday's first reading comes from Deuteronomy, a retelling of Israel's holy history rediscovered in the temple in the late 600s B.C. In the voice of Moses the writer of Deuteronomy calls the people to renew their commitment to their ancient covenant with God. In this book Moses speaks authoritatively from a mountaintop, just as Jesus does in the gospel.

In challenging, rhetorical questions, Moses names the experiences by which the people have come to know and believe that their God is the God of heaven and earth who promises long life and land to those who keep the covenant.

Artis/Ade Behune

God has done great things for Israel in liberating and sustaining them as a people. Moses stirs them to keep up the covenant relationship God has made with them.

The writer of Deuteronomy names God both as "Elohim" and "Yahweh." *Elohim* is the Hebrew word translated in English as *God*. *Yahweh* is the sacred name God gave in answer to Moses' request at the burning bush. *Yahweh* means *I am who am, who causes to be*. Israelites regarded this name as so sacred that they never speak it but instead call Yahweh by the

respectful title *Adonai*, which in English is *Lord*.

Sunday's first reading proclaims Israel's faith that God has been with them in slavery, in struggle and wandering, in war and terror. They experience their God as more powerful than the gods of all other peoples. Keeping the commandments of their God holds the promise of their flourishing, forming them into a people who keep faith with God and show love and respect for one another.

There is no God but Yahweh.

Moses said to the people: Ask now about the days of old, long before your own, ever since the day that God created human beings on the earth. Ask from one end of heaven to the other: Has anything so great as this ever happened? Has its like ever been heard of? Has any people ever heard the voice of God speaking out of a fire, as you have heard, and lived?

Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by terrifying displays of power, as the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?

So acknowledge today and take to heart that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other. Keep God's statutes and commandments, which I am commanding you today for your own well-being and that of your descendants after you, so that you may long remain in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for all time.

Deuteronomy 4:32-34,39-40

● In what fires do you hear God speaking today? In what wars and wonders, nations and peoples do you hear God speaking today?

● How does using Lord for God's name affect how you imagine Israel's God?

PRAY

Spend a quiet moment collecting the images of God you hold within you.

LEADER: O unnameable one, spirit who hovered over the waters at the birth of creation, pillar of fire in desert nights, bread of life, light of the world, we call out your names in prayer.

Call out your names of God.

ALL: Loving Trinity, from the time of Abraham and Sarah until this moment we have called you our God. You claim us, and we claim you. Draw us into your life-giving communion. Amen.



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