

What Kind of God?

Genesis 1:1-2:4

Despite the hype surrounding the decline of religion and the rise of the “nones”, those who don’t claim any religious affiliation, the United States remains one of the world’s most religious nations. In fact, one recent survey found that 90% of Americans believe in God—a rare consensus in American life. Even so, just because there is a belief in a god doesn’t mean that there is belief in the same god.

A few weeks ago, a gathering was held in Washington DC called Rededicate 250. Rededicate 250 ran for over eight hours Washington’s National Mall. Billed by organizers as a “National Jubilee of Prayer, Praise and Thanksgiving,” it included worship songs, appearances by religious leaders, and speeches by members of the Trump administration.

The problem with that kind of gathering, though, is the question of who they were worshipping. With the wide variety of Christian and non-Christian clergy and laity participating, there were many different conceptions of god, of which god they were praying to or talking about. We run into that with other aspects of civil religion, of wondering which god it is we’re thinking of when we put “In God we trust” on our money or say “one nation, under God,” in the Pledge of Allegiance.

That’s why it’s important to know what kind of God we worship. What God has revealed about Himself to us. How God relates to us. That’s why it’s important to celebrate this day that focuses on a doctrine, not an event. Instead of focusing on something Jesus did, we focus today on who God is. Today is the day we celebrate Trinity Sunday, when we remember the Triune nature of God. And at first, that can seem like a strange thing to celebrate. A

doctrine that describes a God that we cannot understand, a God who is Three in One and One in Three, who is Three Persons yet One God, seems unapproachable and incomprehensible.

Our first lesson from Genesis 1-2 tells us a few things about God. First of all, it tells us that God created everything. As we say in the creed, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth.” As good Lutherans, we ask, “what does this mean?”

We often focus on what it means that God created everything in contrast to those who use merely natural or scientific explanations for how we and everything else got here. But it means more than that. The explanation in the Small Catechism of the First article of the Creed reminds us of that. “I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life. He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil. All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him.” God made everything, and keeps everything going.

Yet when we look at God as creator, we see God continuing to be active in the world. God continues to make the rain fall and the crops grow, even if we can explain scientifically how some of that works. God who created and sustains all things. Not impersonal processes.

Not just about what happened in the beginning but what happens now.

Why does this matter? Some of the Founding Fathers on the United States were Deists, who would have no problem believing that God created everything. But they believed in more of a watchmaker god, one who made everything, set everything in motion, and then stepped back and didn't get involved.

The first reading also points to the Trinity, the plurality of our One God, the Three-in-One and One-in-Three appears in the Bible going all the way back to creation: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...'" (Gen. 1:26). On the Sixth Day of creation, God did not say, "Let me make humanity in my image." No, he said, "Let us make humanity in our image..." (plural, not singular!).

This is of course incomprehensible, confusing, beyond our understanding. Thomas Jefferson thought so, and thought it was very problematic: "When we shall have done away with the incomprehensible jargon of the Trinitarian arithmetic, that three are one, and one is three; when we shall have knocked down the artificial scaffolding, and brought to view the very simple structure of Jesus; when, in short, we shall have unlearned everything which has been taught since His day, and got back to the pure and simple doctrines He inculcated, we shall then be truly and worthily His disciples." Jefferson also famously went through the Gospels and cut out the miracles, leaving a Jesus who was merely a moral teacher, definitely not God in the flesh.

The last thing that the creation story tells us about God is that it shows God is the God of the whole world. In the ancient world, the understanding was often that gods were only in control of certain areas, either geographic areas, or of natural phenomena, such as storms or the sea or fertility. Zeus or Thor are the gods of lightning, Poseidon or Neptune are the gods of

the sea. But if God made everything, He is in control of everything, everywhere, all at once, not just piecemeal.

We also know that God keeps His promises. This morning during the Adult Bible class we'll start looking at Sunday School lessons that we don't hear in church, and today we'll look at Balaam and his donkey. Balaam is a prophet who is paid by the Moabites to curse the Israelites as they're preparing to enter the Promised Land. But Balaam can't do that. God won't let him. God promised to bless His people, not curse them, and so Balaam can only give blessings, no matter how much he's been paid to curse them.

God is also a God beyond our understanding. We try to understand God by analogies. Perhaps most famous of all is the three leaf clover, which St. Patrick, the English missionary, used to explain the Trinity to the pagan peoples of ancient Ireland. The analogy goes like this... Just as there are three leaves and yet one clover, so also there are three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—yet only one God. We could also use the three phases of water, or the three parts of an apple, or any other number of things. The trouble with analogies for the Trinity is that all analogies eventually break down. If you press any analogy too far, you become a heretic. Even the Creeds can only get you so far. While the formulations captured in the Creeds are useful for refuting error in belief, the reality is that we are not meant to parse the Trinity; we are meant to praise the living God!

God is beyond our understanding. However, just saying a thing is so does not mean that we can understand it. Just because the Trinity is real does not mean that we will automatically comprehend him. In fact, that is why we have the three Ecumenical Creeds: The Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds are the product of the Church's attempt to articulate the Christian faith in the Trinity over several

centuries of controversy, confusion, and debate. You are probably used to saying the Apostles' Creed at Baptisms and the Nicene Creed at other times, along with the different explanations from the Small Catechism of the different parts that expand and enhance our understandings. Then once each year we trot out the Athanasian Creed and dust off that dense defense of Trinitarian faith, which has been paraphrased by someone this way: "The Father is incomprehensible, the Son is incomprehensible, and the Spirit is incomprehensible. The whole thing is incomprehensible!"

According to tradition, one day while Augustine was walking along the beach, lost in thought about the Trinity, he saw a child running back and forth with a seashell. The boy was scooping water from the ocean and pouring it into a small hole in the sand. Augustine asked, "What are you doing?" The child replied, "I'm trying to fit the ocean into this hole." At that moment, Augustine realized the futility of his own efforts: he had been trying to fit an infinite God into the limits of his finite mind.

Yet the Trinity reminds us that God comes near to us. God the Father is active in providing all that we need, sustaining creation. In Jesus, God became flesh, moved into the neighborhood, and faced all of the trials and temptations we do, yet remained without sin. Through the blood of Jesus, we have been made holy. Because Jesus is our great high priest, advocating for us with the Father, we can approach the throne of grace with confidence. We have been declared righteous before God. And the Holy Spirit, whose work we celebrated last Sunday, works in us to create faith, and enlighten us, and gather us together.

I may never be able to understand who or what the Trinity is or why he loves me. But I believe it. Moreover, it is that faith in the work of the Triune God, the faith which the Holy Spirit places in my heart, that will ultimately save me.

So, what kind of God do we have? We have a God who made everything and continues to keep everything going. We have a God who is beyond our understanding, but not beyond our faith and trust. We have a God who keeps his promises. We have a God who blesses us and is with us. That's a God worth trusting in.

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