30 May 2021 Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
The Festival of the Holy Trinity Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

"Mysterious but Good"
Text: John 3:1-17; Isaiah 6:1-8

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

We worship the trinity in unity and the unity in trinity.

That's what we just confessed in the Athanasian Creed. We worship ***this*** God. This God that cannot be explained, only proclaimed. All attempts to explain the mystery of God the Holy Trinity have failed. How God can be one yet three, three yet one. One God in three persons, three persons in one God. Finite, limited minds cannot fully understand an infinite, limitless God. All attempts to explain the Trinity (and maybe you've heard some of these) - that God is like a clover, one plant with three leaves; or like an apple, one fruit with three parts, the core, the flesh, and the skin; or that God is like water which can exist three different states: solid, liquid, or gas - all fail because they either divide the three persons of the Trinity, collapse them together, or limit each person in some way. *Better* instead is to be like the prophet Isaiah and just stand in wonder and awe before this Lord, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, all co-existing, all 100% God, and yet one God, and confess that we have no right to do so. That sinners like us have no place before a holy, sinless God - and yet He ***wants*** us here. He wants us to come before Him to receive His forgiveness. Like Isaiah did.

Now, that doesn't work for some people. For some who will only believe what is logical to them, what they can figure out, what makes sense to them. A God who fits their categories, checks their boxes, fits their expectations, thinking, and understanding. The next step then is that what this God ***does*** must also fit their expectations, thinking, and understanding. And if God doesn't do or command or approve of what they want or think is right, then He is rejected.

There are a couple of problems, of course, with that. First, making God fit us rather than us fit God is to put ourselves above God and make ourselves God. But also this: there then will be as many gods in this world as there are people, each person fashioning his or her own god based upon their own expectations and thoughts and dreams, which all are different for just about everyone. Which is, when you think about it, not far from where our world is today, with its abundance of gods and religions and denominations. There is Tom, Dick, and Harry's god, Oprah's god, this god and that god, but not one true God. Which is exactly what satan wants. For if everyone has a god, then no one has God.

But God is not so easily tamed; not so easily controlled. We may want a God who is domesticated and behaves how we think He should, but as CS Lewis once famously said: *God is not tame, but He is good*. So if we change Him and tame Him, then we will also be losing His good.

So we are left with a God we cannot fully understand, because He is so different and above us, but one we can trust, because He is good. And that is far better.

And that is what Jesus was teaching Nicodemus that night when Nicodemus came to Him seeking answers. He knew Jesus knew something about God, that ***God was with Him***. So Jesus teaches him about God - about a God who is mysterious and beyond our understanding, but who is good and trustworthy. That while Nicodemus may not get all the answers he was looking for, he get what he needed - the gift of faith in the God in the flesh that was sitting right in front of him.

So **first** Jesus says to him: *Truth. Unless one is born again, born from above, born of God, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*

And that leaves Nicodemus befuddled. He cannot fit what Jesus says into his own thinking and understanding. This teaching does not fit his earthly categories. It's not *logical*. He knows something of birth, perhaps having children of his own. So based on his own knowledge and experience, being born again just isn't possible. You want me to climb back up inside my mother? No, but Jesus wants him to think of God *differently* - **as Father**. Not as a God he serves, but as *a God that serves him* and cares for him. A God who fathers, who begets life - and not just physical life or in a physical way, like his children at home. That it is not good enough to be a child of Abraham, a physical descendant of Abraham - he must be a child of God. Born. Born of God. Born of water and the Spirit. Okaaaay. Nicodemus is going to have to chew on that a while . . .

So Jesus then moves into **phase two** of His teaching, and starts talking about the work of God the Spirit like the wind. And that just as you cannot control the wind, so you cannot control God. God cannot be tamed to fit how we want Him to be.

Now that makes *a little more sense* . . . because we know something about wind and that it doesn't always blow where you want it to. A sudden gust of wind messes up your perfectly combed hair. The wind blows the leaves you worked so hard raking into a pile all back over your yard. There is the hard and devastating winds of hurricanes, and terrible and unpredictable winds of tornadoes. But there is also the cool breeze on a hot summer day, and the refreshing breeze that comes off the ocean.

The work of God is like that, Nicodemus. Not according to our thoughts, wishes, desires, and control. Sometimes He comes and messes up things in your life, because sometimes things in your life need messing up! Sometimes He needs to grab our attention and turn us back to Him. But there are also times when He will be that refreshing, cooling breeze to

give us the relief we need. And just as birth pains come upon a woman quickly and often unexpectedly - earlier than was expected or much later - so it is with God and the children He fathers. It is His doing, not ours. When and where it pleases Him. When and where He says it will be, not us.

Well this is so completely different than what Nicodemus was expecting! From what he thought he knew and the way he thought things were. His mind is blown, blown wide open. His finite, limited mind blown open by an infinite, limitless God. To think on things in such a new way . . .

Well, yes. But Nicodemus, **Jesus has saved the best for last!** The best, but also the most mysterious and hardest for us to comprehend or understand. ***That God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life***. That is, that God the Father would send God the Son into a sinful world filled with sinful and rebellious people to die for them, so that they could be His born again, born from above, born of God, children. And that God would consider this a good thing - to trade His life for yours. His life of limitless value, for your life of what value? Of nothing close to that, that's for sure. To love a world that doesn't love Him. To save a world that turns away from Him to sin.

Who does that? What category of this world does that fit into? That's who God is, Nicodemus. That's what God does. He's not a God of laws, rules, and demands, but of fathering, caring, and saving. And you'll see that when you see His Son lifted up like that bronze serpent in the wilderness was for Israel - the Son of God lifted up on the pole of the cross. Look at Him, see your God there for you, believe that He is there for you and your sin, and you will live. Eternal life.

I wish John would have told us more of their conversation! What Nicodemus said next. But maybe he didn't say anything. Maybe he was just in awe of all that he had just heard, how utterly different and mysterious and beyond anything in this world. But John *does* tell us this - that Nicodemus saw Jesus on the cross, that he helped to take Him down and bury Him (John 19:39), and that Nicodemus actually defended Jesus a bit (John 7:50). Like maybe by water and the Spirit he *had* been born again, born from above, born of God, without having to climb back into his mother!

And so it is with us. The Spirit, who like the wind, works when and where God wills, has worked in you. **And the when and the where is where God has told us:** in His Word, in His Word combined with the water of Baptism, and in His Word combined with the bread and wine of the Supper. *How* that works is mysterious and beyond our understanding - like the wind. *How* the Word and Spirit works in hearts, *how* the Word and Spirit works as we proclaim the Gospel and the forgiveness of sins, *how* the Word and Spirit works as we pour the water of Baptism and eat the Body and Blood of Christ in the Supper - *but work He does*. Begetting children of God, sustaining us with His life and forgiveness, and keeping us in His care. Probably not how we would do it, if it were up to us. But good. God working

His eternal good in and through these ordinary ways and means.

Which - like with who God is - all we do is proclaim these things, His works and ways, and stand in awe. That we can stand in the presence of God, and that God wants us here with Him! That while we cannot tame or control God, we *can* trust Him and His Word. In all parts of our lives. Following His will and His ways, loving, forgiving, and serving, giving and helping generously and sacrificially and confidently. For if He sent His only-begotten Son for us to die for us - if He would do that for us, will He not along with Him give us everything else we need (Romans 8:32)?

So that's what we proclaim this day we celebrate the Holy Trinity. And what we proclaim, we live. That's why, as the Athanasian Creed said, it is *necessary* to think of God as Trinity. Not just so we know the right answer on a final exam we have to pass to get into heaven! But so we know what God has done for us - God the **Father**, who sent His beloved **Son**, who gave us His **Spirit**, to save us and give us this new kind of life to live. If God is not a Trinity, then that didn't happen, *couldn't* happen. But it did. A mysterious, not-like-this-world God, acting in a mysterious, not-like-this-world - but GOOD - way. Being good, giving His good, for you. To raise you with His Son to a new and eternal life.

Which is also mysterious. For what is an eternal life like? How can we think of life without end? We can't. But again, we can trust. That as the one who gives it is good, so will it be. And so we are. Good, not because we've done it, but because He has.

So this we proclaim. This we trust and believe. This we live. And this is our joy! A good God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, working and giving His goodness to us.

So this day we joyously proclaim:

Blessèd be the Holy Trinity and the undivided Unity.
Let us give glory to him because he has shown his mercy to us (Introit).

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.