

The Story of a Name: A sermon for Trinity Sunday, Year C  
(Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Psalm 8; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15)

“O LORD our Governor, \* how exalted is your Name in all the world.” Amen.

For those of you who might be new to liturgical churches or to Christianity, let me start by saying that this is an odd day. Today is Trinity Sunday, so our celebration is guided by a belief that is at the center of our faith and yet does not appear in the bible in any easy-to-point-to form. Perhaps as a result, there's been a lot of debate during two thousand years of Christianity about how we should talk of the beautiful and peculiar character of the God revealed and experienced as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Lots of debate, as I'm sure you've experienced in this town, leads to complicated decisions. The result, in our case, is a lot of fancy Greek and Latin words to describe the church's shared discernment of the nature of the Divine, lots of dos and don'ts for our Christian God-talk. We also have lots of jokes about how hard those words are to understand, how complicated and abstruse the doctrines associated with them.

If you ask me, that all gets in the way. I'd like to invite us to set this baggage aside for a few moments, if we are carrying it. The doctrine of the Trinity is a far more interesting and vital thing than the jokes about accidental heresy would lead us to believe. In a sense, this doctrine is a story, the story of God calling out to us in dynamic ways, and our inspired but inadequate attempts to give that God a name. Let's all take Trinity Sunday as an occasion to boldly tell the story without fear that we might say something theologically questionable. Let's just tell the story, and if you'd like to discuss any heresies I've committed, speak to me after the service.

[Pause.] It begins with the people of Israel and their faith in the God who chose their ancestor Abraham. At the core of belief and practice in the faith from which Christianity developed, and that our Lord claimed as his own, is the ancient statement of faith we know as Deuteronomy 6:4 and Jews know as the *Shema*, from the word with which it begins:

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד

*Hear, O Israel! The LORD your God: the LORD is one.*

*The LORD is one.* It sounds obvious enough to us, and it's now a common enough belief in this world shaped so strongly by Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. But it was a radical notion when the people of Israel first heard and proclaimed it. If the LORD is one, then the world is not a capricious playground, much less a violent battleground, in which a pantheon of gods jockey for position. It is reliable, after a fashion, subject to a unified purpose--*governed* by the Lord GOD. The tone throughout today's psalm is of majesty and awe in the presence of so great a Governor: "What is man that you should be mindful of him? \* the son of man that you should seek him out? ... O LORD our Governor, \* how exalted is your Name in all the world!"

*How exalted is your Name.* That name was so exalted for the people of Israel that they never actually spoke it, just as modern Jews do not speak it today. The name of God in the Hebrew Scriptures is four letters that were not meant to be pronounced. In fact, the text in Hebrew includes nonsensical vowels that indicate what to say instead; sometimes the vowels are from the word for *Lord*, sometimes they are from the word for *God*.

Whenever you see LORD or GOD written in all caps in an English translation, you're encountering the unspeakable name of the God of Israel, the name of the God who called out to

Moses on Mt. Sinai, the name that means “I AM WHO I AM” or “I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE” (Exodus 3:14). So the story begins with a people and a proclamation: The LORD is one. Exalted is the Name of the LORD our Governor, who led us out of Egypt and claims us as God’s own.

But Christians believe that the story of the name of God doesn’t end there. The founders of our faith had an experience that added something to their notion of God’s exalted name, and of God’s oneness, something they struggled to make sense of but that they knew would change everything. They met a peculiar teacher from Nazareth.

We've been telling his story since the church year began at the beginning of December. He was born and grew to be a man. He healed the sick. He brought hope to those in need. He preached a message of repentance, of purity of heart, of relationships mattering more than rules and customs. He said he came that they might have life and have it abundantly. He told them to begin their prayers with these words: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.” He seemed to radiate a certain presence and power. He knew his disciples better than they knew themselves. He began as their teacher. By the end he was their Lord.

And then he died. It seemed like all hope was lost, like it had all been a fantastical dream. But word started to spread, first from the women who had gone to the tomb to finish preparing his body. “He is not here, he has risen!” Soon he had appeared to them all, and they started to make sense of the things he had said about himself. Years later, followers would write about his life on Earth, connecting the dots of his proclamation and their experience of him. So we hear from Peter: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God”; from Thomas: “My Lord and my God”; from Jesus himself: “Before Abraham was, I AM.” The Lord is one, they said, and yet we have seen the Lord made manifest in Jesus of Nazareth. The Lord is one. The Son shows us

the Father.

Of course, something else happened amid all this, and that's the part of the story we celebrated last week. On the night before he died for them, the Son of God made a promise to his friends, the promise we heard this morning: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

The last gift of Jesus to his friends and the first gift of Christ to his church was the Spirit. The Spirit guided their ministry in the days to come, and guides it still. The Spirit poured the love of God into their hearts, and pours it still. The Spirit was faithful to the promise of the Son and is faithful still: "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." [pause] And so the story continues ever on: The Lord is one. God's Spirit is among us.

It took us a long time to find some precise language for what this all meant, 400 years or so to reach something resembling an agreement about the Lord who is one but whom we experience in these different ways. Truth be told, that's an interesting story too, a story that suggests other points to emphasize and clarify. But it's not the essential part. The essential part is the story of God reaching out: reaching out to deliver the people of Israel, reaching out to teach and heal the disciples and so many others throughout Galilee, reaching out to unite the followers in Jerusalem with Gentiles all around the Mediterranean and all around the world. Here's how my favorite theologian sums it all up:

“That which is believed in is not a certain scheme of divinity, but a name ... [And through our speaking that name] we claim our spiritual position, we assert our union with that Being.” We claim our part in the story by speaking the name as we have learned and experienced it, the name that was spoken when we were adopted in baptism. We *bind* unto ourselves today the strong name of the Trinity, and we do it in just a minute with these words: “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty ... and in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God ... and I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord, the giver of life.”

When you sing those words today, remember that you are part of God’s great and ongoing love story, a story we are blessed to be helping write. As the Father reaches out to us with the gift of the Son, as the Son reaches out to us with the gift of the Spirit, as the Spirit reaches out to us with the gift of the never-failing love of the Father and the Son, so may we reach out in love to each other and to all the world, in God’s exalted and hallowed name: Father, Son, Spirit.