

## **Trinity Sunday: How Do You Contain God?**

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, May 30, 2010.

*Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Canticle 13; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15*

I'm sure glad that, as St. Paul says, we are justified by faith. Given our readings today, if we had to be justified by understanding, I'm afraid we'd all be lost. The truth is, God is bigger than our understanding, and yet we still try to understand. But how much is us understanding God, and how much is more like trying to put God in a box that we can handle?

This month, we from the West “celebrated” the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the eruption of Mt. St. Helens, which sits on the southwestern corner of Washington State. The day after it blew its top off, in Spokane on the other side of the state, 300 miles away, we were knee-deep in ash. When the volcano in Iceland erupted this spring, it reminded me of another volcano in Iceland, just a few years before Mt. St. Helens. These people are used to volcanoes—Iceland is a geothermal hotspot. Hekla's been there a long time and was named as one of the two mouths of Hell. Apparently you can hear groans from dead sinners in the crater.

The interesting thing about this new one is that it's the first that I know of, that people have tried to stop, or at least corral. The trouble with this volcano was that when the slow thick lava came out, it made a beeline toward their harbor. If the lava filled up the harbor, one of Iceland's main ports would be gone, and so would the town's main reason for existence. So somebody got the idea of stopping the lava by cooling it off with water.

It takes only two inches of cooled hardened lava to support a person, who stands on the crust with a hose and waters the oozing lava like a garden. Only you couldn't stand still. You had to march in place. Even then, sometimes your boots burst into flame. When the lava kept coming, they switched from hoses to giant pumps. By the time the volcano was declared dead five months later, the people had pumped enough water to equal turning Niagara Falls onto the island for half an hour. And it worked—kind of. They kept most of the lava from going into the harbor—except that what didn't flow into the harbor got diverted into their town and their homes. So much for containing a volcano; the volcano just did a new thing.

Maybe that's why the early Israelites associated God with Mount Sinai. The God who spoke from that mountain of smoke and fire would not be kept confined either. From the time that God revealed himself on Mount Sinai, people have tried to box God in and confine God – to a Temple, to a single group of people, even just to heaven itself. Over and over in the Hebrew Scripture, God reminds the people of Israel – I am bigger and more encompassing than the human mind can comprehend. You are to serve that God in bigger ways than your human heart is inclined to do. Love the sojourner. Care for orphans, widows, the poor, the lepers. Pray for your enemies. You can't have me all to yourself. You can't keep God in a box.

Finally, God leaves all of the boxes behind, that people have tried to put God in.

Not to be confined even in a box labeled “God,” God empties himself of Godness to put on humanness. God dwells in a human being, Jesus of Nazareth, so that human beings can dwell in God. Jesus acts out of the box, too. He blesses the poor, feeds the hungry, and hangs around with misfits. He makes it clear that we are closest to God when we are servants to the people that we tend to avoid.

When Jesus leaves this earth, he promises the Holy Spirit to come in his name – because you can’t contain Jesus either – not in his human life, not on the earth, not even in death. The Holy Spirit helps us do the work that Jesus commissions us to do – to spread the Good News to all nations to the end of the age. To all nations and to the end of the age, because you can’t confine the Holy Spirit to a time or a place or a people.

When all the apostles have died, it is left to the early church to figure out what all this means. One thing they know for sure, that there is only one God. So what about Jesus? Was Jesus created by God? Was Jesus, being divine, not really human? Or was Jesus, being human, not really divine? Who is the Holy Spirit? In the early days of the church, these questions are burning issues. People debate the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in barbershops, at the mall, in the local Kroger’s. Can you imagine walking into your local Home Depot and hearing everybody argue about the nature of the Holy Trinity? People coming to blows over the meaning of One God in Three Persons?

It takes the Church a few centuries and four church councils full of bishops to come up with a statement about the Holy Trinity. It’s hard, of course, because the Trinity is not just a definition or a formula. The Trinity is our human attempt to talk how we experience the mystery of God. The Holy Trinity is a way of thinking about God, but it doesn’t contain God. It’s more like our way of trying to contain a volcano. The doctrine of the Trinity tells more about our limits in understanding God and our need for neat formulas than it tells about God. We can be sure that God is more complex than any formula, more complex than we could ever know. That’s okay, because as one theologian said, if I can imagine God, the God I can imagine is not worth worshipping. Who knows—maybe God is not really Holy Trinity but rather Holy Gazillionity—God in gazillion persons? Why not? Just because we can’t count that far doesn’t mean that God can’t be that much.

How then do we understand and say who God is for us? Understand, not so much for the knowledge as for the adoration -- so we know how to worship God in all God’s glory. The early church knew this. When they finally came up with the statement that we call the Nicene Creed, it was a powerful statement of the mystery of God – an act of worship. It was recited to invoke over and over again that power and that mystery. The trouble is, when you say something every week for 1500 years, it sort of loses some of the pizzazz. Now it’s time to reclaim the Trinity and the Creed as an act of worship and wonder in God.

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Julian of Norwich knew about the wonder. For her the Holy Trinity was not a doctrine, it was an *experience*. She wrote, “The Trinity is our maker, the Trinity is our protector, the Trinity is our everlasting lover, the Trinity is our endless joy and bliss.” This is the kind of Creed that we say. When we say, “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty,” we are not saying we believe that God exists, the way that we say we believe in the tooth fairy or we believe in ghosts. About that kind of believing in, St.

Augustine says, demons and evildoers may believe in God. When we affirm our belief in God in the Nicene Creed, think of it more like an intimate word to a lover. “I **believe** in you, my Beloved. I set all my life before you, because in you we live and move and have our being.” At Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit was like listening to a love song spoken in our own tongue. In response, we write a love letter back to God– the Nicene Creed. The Creed is not as exciting as tongues of fire and personalized sermons, but hey, we are human and God is God. As a love letter, the Creed might sound like this:

## **The Nicene Creed** **A love letter to God**

We believe in you, wondrous God, Creator of heaven and earth,  
creator of us your people.

You are our loving and faithful parent who calls us to our true home in you.

You draw us to you, toward a fulfillment that we call your Kingdom.

Prodigal sons and daughters that we are,

we return home to you starving but penitent,

hardly daring to hope that a hot meal would be ready for us,

and you run out to us crying with joy ,

and you give us not just a hot meal but a heavenly banquet.

We believe in you, our beloved Lord, Jesus Christ.

You believed in us enough to give your life for us.

Born to share with us how to be truly human,

you paid the cost of our sinfulness.

You presented our broken humanity to God,

so that we too can cry out AAbba, Father!@

We believe in you, beloved Holy Spirit.

You speak to us in a love song spoken in our own tongue.

You come to us in our community, the Church.

You hover over the waters of our baptism,

breathe forgiveness into us when we sin.

You give us life in all our resurrections when we die and rise each day,  
whenever we overcome despair or hatred or jealousy.

You send us out to spread your love throughout all time and places.

You, God, will never be contained.

You are Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

our maker, our protector, our everlasting lover, our endless joy and bliss.

Amen.