

I BELIEVE IN ONE GOD: FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT

Isaiah 6:1-6; John 3:1-17

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson
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“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts.” Isaiah 6:3

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Today is Trinity Sunday, the Sunday in the Church Year set aside to focus on what Christians believe about God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In John chapter 3, Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, comes at night to talk privately with Jesus about a matter of deep concern. Jesus comes right to the point. “Nicodemus, you can’t *see* the kingdom of God without being born from above. You can’t *enter* the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. You must be born from above. The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus was dumbfounded. “How can I enter into my mother’s womb and be born again?” Nicodemus was a literalist. Taking the Bible literally can lead us astray. Some parts of the Bible require a metaphorical interpretation. Here, Jesus speaks metaphorically, not literally of how we must be born again.

Jesus says that human nature requires a radical change in order for us even to see God’s kingdom -- let alone enter it. So radical is the change that Jesus uses the metaphor of a new creation. In the beginning God created the world through his Word and Spirit. The Spirit swept over the primeval waters and God spoke the universe into existence. God created a good universe but we ate the forbidden fruit, we put ourselves at the center of the universe, we turned from the source of life and chose to go down the ways of death. Our rebellion, however, did not diminish God’s love for us. God loved the world so much that God’s Word, by which God created the world, became flesh and lived among us in the person of Jesus. Furthermore, just as

God's Spirit hovered over the face of the deep at the dawn of Creation, God's Spirit hovers over us calling us lost, dying, sinners into new life, enabling us to trust Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Through the water of baptism and the life giving Spirit, God opens our eyes to see new possibilities for this world -- to see God's kingdom. God's Spirit enables us to enter God's kingdom where God's will is done. So, without using the word *Trinity*, Jesus spoke to Nicodemus of the necessity of God's Word and Spirit giving us a new birth.

Christians believe in one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. People often say, "We all believe in the same God, don't we? Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians." But *do we all believe in the same God?* Muslims and Jews are deeply offended when well-meaning Christians, wishing to sound tolerant say, "We all believe in the same God." Many Muslims and Jews hear that statement, not as tolerant, but as condescending if not imperialistic; as Christians imposing on others our unique religious beliefs and not respecting religious differences.

When Mark and I were in Egypt, our tour guide, a 33 year old Muslim woman named Amani, took us to the mosque of Muhammad Ali, a 19th century Egyptian political leader. We removed our shoes to enter the mosque, sat on the thick, rich oriental carpets that covered the floor, and admired the beauty of this vast domed structure. What a magnificent building. Against the background of this vast monument of Islam, Amani explained to us the five central beliefs of Islam. 1. There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet. 2. Muslims must pray five times a day. 3. Muslims must give 2½ per cent of their wealth each year for the needy. 4. Muslims must fast from dawn to sunset in the month of Ramadan. 5. If possible, they must make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their life time.

After she outlined Islamic beliefs I said, "We share many beliefs. For example, we also believe in one God who created the universe by his Word." Amani shook her head in agreement.

“Yes. We believe that Allah effortlessly created the world by his Word.” I went on: “Christians believe that God’s Spirit breathes life into creation.” She shook her head in agreement. I became excited. She’s well on her way to believing in the Trinity, creation by God’s Word and Spirit.

I pressed on, “And we believe that the Word by which God created became a human being in Jesus Christ.” That was going too far. She respectfully disagreed, “We believe that Jesus was a prophet. He was born of the Virgin Mary. But we do not believe that God became a man. That belief deeply offends us because it takes away from the dignity of Allah.” I agreed with her. “Yes, Amani, you’re absolutely right. Our belief does detract from the dignity of God and yet we glory in the humility of God who comes to us in the crucified Jesus Christ.”

We talked about God’s plan of salvation, Islamic and Christian. We agreed that God so loved the world that he wants all people to enjoy paradise. Amani explained, “Allah rewards every good thing we do by giving us 10 points, whereas he detracts only one point for bad things we do. That way, one good deed outweighs many bad deeds and many people will be saved.”

I responded, “Christians also believe that God loves the world and wants everybody to enter his kingdom. We differ, however, on how God weighs our sins. We believe that we could never pile up enough good works to outweigh our basic attitude toward God. Our problem is not simply the bad things we do but our relationship to God that leads us down the ways of death. We believe we can’t be saved apart from God’s grace – God’s undeserved, unearned love and forgiveness that comes through Jesus. We believe that God takes upon himself all our sins and suffers on our behalf that we might have life. The Holy Spirit that breathed life into the universe in the beginning, breathes new life in us, enabling us to trust in Jesus and receive from him the salvation he earns for us.”

We ended our dialogue with a new respect for one another's faith. Although we share much in common as religious human beings, we recognized that, at a number of crucial points, Islam and Christianity can't be reconciled.⁴ ^{later...} And I discovered something about my own Christian faith as I tried to explain it to Amani. I discovered that I can't explain what I believe about God without referring to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

God loves the world he created by his Word.

In Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, God has come to bring us back to God.

The Holy Spirit brings us to rebirth. Apart from the Holy Spirit, our Lord can neither be loved, nor known, nor served. The Holy Spirit opens our hearts to Christ, leads us to repentance, empowering us to live in Christ's service.

So I encourage you, here and now --

- empowered by the Holy Spirit,
- open your heart to Christ
- claim the new birth that will enable you to see and enter God's kingdom now and in eternity.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let us pray: Father, we praise you; through your Word and Holy Spirit you created all things. You reveal your salvation in all the world by sending to us Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Through your Holy Spirit you give us a share in your life and love. Fill us with the vision of your glory, that we may always serve and praise you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.