

What If God is More Verb than Noun?

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Exodus 3:13-14 and I John 4:16b

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Texts:

"Moses said to God, 'Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then, what shall I tell them?' God said to Moses, 'I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites, 'I am sent me.'" Exodus 3: 13-14

"God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him." I John 4: 16b.

Today, before I preach this sermon on the Holy Trinity, I want to say a word or two to place the sermon in context. Our nation is embroiled in conflict and division. We did not get here by accident. We got here by taking something for granted. We took for granted that humanity would over time just naturally become more and more humane. It won't. The world doesn't work like that. There's nothing automatic about the redemption and restoration of humanity to its full humanity.

Looking for differences rather than commonalities, seeing any differences as dangers and threats, marking as enemies those who disagree with us or critique our views or call into question our histories, dividing people by playing on their prejudices: all of these are deeply engrained habits to which most people resort under stress.

They are also habits that some folks, sadly, cultivate. And there are always people ready to take advantage of these human weaknesses in order to gain power.

The way of Jesus cannot be taken for granted. It is as scorned today as it was when it put him on a cross. It is seen as weak to love those who hate you, to turn cheeks and to make yourself vulnerable. It is seen as foolish to take the gospel seriously outside the doors of the church building. But, since that's where we all are right now, maybe it is time to do just that.

There are men and women and children who are frightened today just because of the color of their skin. Some are speaking of their fears softly and peacefully, others are lashing out in anger. But however the fears and frustrations and laments are spoken, they come from *more* than a tragic history. They exemplify a present tragedy.

There are those who are taking advantage of this moment to wreak violence and discord. And there are those who are working to the stoke this violence and discord to their own ends.

We, it seems to me, have an opportunity as followers of Jesus of Nazareth, a man of an ethnicity and faith which have been scorned and excluded throughout history, to listen to

the fear, and to find and act in that love which casts out all fear. Because God is love. And whoever lives in love, lives in God, and God lives in them.

This is not a political issue. It is a human issue. And there is nothing foreign to God in our humanity.

Let us pray: Give us the courage, Lord, to risk your way of love in this world we inhabit. Amen.

Today on the Christian calendar is the Feast Day of the Holy Trinity. This is the day each year when, traditionally, ministers and priests around the world test the patience of their congregants by exposing them to the most intricate, esoteric and boring aspects of our theology.

Today, however, I will depart from this noble tradition because I have a secret to tell you about the Holy Trinity.

I've been waiting to tell someone this secret. I have withheld this secret from many people, believing, as I did, that they were not ready to hear it. But I believe you are the very people.

Are you ready to hear this secret? Are you the people for whom I've waited to tell this secret?

I shall tell you now.

The secret to the meaning of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is not hidden behind the ornate curtains of fourth century theology; it is not held within the history of the exiles of the saints and sinners, orthodox teachers and their heretical opponents who strived against one another in the third and fourth centuries. The secret of the Trinity is not a matter of mastering the technical aspects of obscure Greek vocabulary, of knowing words like "homoousias," and "homoiousias," or the puzzles of mathematics, "how can something be both one and three?"

The secret to the meaning of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is "is." That's it. "Is." That odd little verb denoting the dynamic "to be" that stands exactly in the middle of the sentence: "God IS love." The secret to the Trinity is "is."

I've heard complaints for years from dear friends who are Unitarian Universalists that the word Trinity does not appear in the Bible. No, it doesn't. The doctrine of the Trinity trailed behind the early Christians who were trying to make sense of their experience of meeting this God who wouldn't stand still, this God who kept meeting them in unexpected ways, who kept breaking out of the sacred boxes they kept trying to put him into.

The Christian teaching of the Trinity is our halting, stumbling, sometimes bumbling attempt to say that the God who is, the God who is God alone, meets us in ways that never stop surprising us.

We sure didn't expect God to be and become human. We didn't see that coming, and we still can't account for it.

We didn't expect God to enter into us and into our community, and to move us in directions we frankly thought were unholy and wholly inappropriate. We didn't see that coming.

The One, the Three, the One whose Name cannot be named, the Life that lives eternally, the Truth that calls every fact into question, the Love that puts us to shame by never shaming us, the Divine who became human, the Holy who can be experienced but remains beyond comprehension. Today, we celebrate this God who "is."

That rag tag bunch of Jewish fishermen and former followers of John the Baptizer believed in the living God. These followers and the early church long after them only had one Bible, what we call the Hebrew Scriptures. There was no Old Testament because there was then no New Testament either. Everything the early church said about the written testimony to God, the written word, they said about what we call the Old Testament. For a very long time, the church had that holy scripture alone, and a scattering of letters and what they called "memoirs of the apostles," which they didn't believe was scripture. And in all of those sources, the affirmation was enthusiastic: The Lord is God, the Lord alone.

But that fisherman Peter and his apostolic friends, and that rabbinical scholar Saul who became Paul, the traveling evangelist, and the mysterious writer who gave us the Fourth Gospel and the Letters named in honor of the Beloved Disciple, they couldn't account for the spiritual experiences they were having using the language of faith they had inherited.

God seemed, more than ever, to be a moving target. God seemed, more than ever, to be moving. God seemed more than ever to be loose in this world.

It was actually one of you in this congregation who made me realize that trying to force God to be just a Noun is a real problem. I've told you that one of my professors used to joke that God can only save some people by making preachers of them. That may be true. But what is even more true is this: God can only theologically educate some people by making them pastors. We learn about God best in community. That includes pastors.

And it was one of you who made me realize the significance of God's insistence that Moses told his people, "*I am who I am. Tell them I am sent you.*" That passage in Hebrew is strange; it can also be translated, "I will be Whomever I will be." And it was one of you who made me realize the significance of that passage in First John, "*God is love.*" Not "God loves." But "*God is love.*" I should have gotten there myself, but it took you to teach me this.

I should have gotten there myself thirty years ago when Professor James Torrance had our post-graduate seminar at a King's College study Eberhard Jungel's ground-breaking monograph, "*Gottes Sein ist im Werden,*" which eventually was published in English translation as "*God's Being is in Becoming.*"

You hear that? That was the point. God's is-ness keeps on is-ing. God keeps unfolding. But I was too wrapped up in the technicalities of the theological forest to see the trees.

God isn't just a moving target. God is "the moving." The clues to the mystery were all there from the beginning if I'd just paid more attention.

Last week, Debbie and I were visiting with a dear friend of ours on Saint Simons Island, a gallery owner. Over wine on her deck, appropriately socially-distanced from one another, sitting next to a fairway where I've lost countless golf balls, she said that as she aged she was having a hard time remembering things.

We agreed, "us too," but then quickly explained what a blessing this can be. For example, Debbie and I are avid fans of mysteries. We've started re-watching "Inspector Morse" recently. And it's wonderful. We have only vague recollections of characters and scenes, but we are endlessly surprised by who did it.

So why didn't I see the clues in this biggest mystery of all? God had been dropping clues all the way through the Hebrew Bible.

God is the Word speaking all things into existence. And God is the Spirit brooding over the face of the formless primordial deep.

God confronts the prophets as Word, but in ways that endlessly surprise them.

You remember Elijah! God was not in the windstorm. God was not in the earthquake. But God was in that annoying incessant scratching sound that drove the prophet to the Desert of Damascus.

Where is Wisdom to be found? asks the wise. What animates the animals of the forest and makes the young lions seek their prey? asks the psalmist.

We should have connected the dots long ago, the fiery dots Abraham saw in the night sky, or in visitors' predicting the birth of his son, an announcement which made his elderly bride laugh, or in the terrible voice that led Abraham and his son up a mountain to the brink of an abyss, only to stay his arm.

We should all have connected the dots. Jacob and the unnamed wrestler on the banks of the Jabbok River. Moses put it all together. Left us the clues, but we got distracted by our need to nail God down with our nouns and names.

God moved in down the street, we were told. Of course, we were told this a generation after Jesus left his followers terrified and bewildered, and finally they started saying to each other, "but what if God was in Christ?!!!"

What does it mean that God eternally verbs his way through time and space?

Let me tell you one thing I think this means: We can never never never decide that God can't meet us in this place or that place. God can meet us anywhere.

And, let me tell you one other thing it means, we can never decide that God must meet us like this or that, but in no other way. God will be who God will be, and God will meet us however God wishes.

Oh, and one more thing, we can never decide that God is finished moving, that we can convert this verb into a noun, fix it to the ground, make the Prime Mover stop moving.

What do we do with the God who is more verb than noun?

We should pay attention to the tracks that verb has made through history. We should watch closely the kinds of things that verb sets in motion. We should take seriously the character that verb has disclosed in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, who shows us what love looks like in human flesh.

And we should be attentive to the ways God the Spirit just keeps rolling on, crashing through the barriers we thought were set in stone forever.

However God is, creating, parenting, inspiring, hoping, loving, and reconciling, in whatever ways "I am" and "I will be" keeps manifests among us, we would do well to be as verbal in our living as God is. Because, as Jesus tells us, it is by being like God that we show we are his children.

Amen.