

Trinity Sunday  
John 16:12-16  
May 30, 2010

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Denver, Colorado

There was a time when one's faith was described by what one believed. Doctrine, interpretation, and apology were what told the difference between true faith from false faith. Ever since the first Jerusalem conference in Acts, church elders have gotten together for argument and vote in order to decide what the limits of the true faith were. The council of Nicea in 325 CE was one of those conventions. A rudimentary doctrine of the trinity was one of the things they came up with. The trinity, historically considered, is a rendering of the Christian faith in Aristotelian terms, the conceptual language of the time. After Nicea, the emperor insisted that all swear to believe it. Those who did not were branded, chased out, exiled. Beliefs were a matter of life and death.

A cousin of that creed, the Apostles' Creed, first referenced in about 390 CE, is believed to have originated in baptismal liturgies. It too, is divided into three parts, one for Father, one for Son, and one for the Holy Spirit. It is a statement of the trinity. The Lutheran Church is one in which at least one of these creeds, or statements of faith is publicly confessed, announced, in most every worship setting.

Surely, these statements of faith have been used to discern true faith from false. But more and more our religious *identity* functions as of greater significance than our *beliefs*.<sup>1</sup> Hear Reza Aslan, an American Muslim on this:

We have to understand that all religions, in all parts of the world, are always more a matter of identity than they are a matter of belief. We in the United States, a quintessentially Protestant country, have been lulled into the false idea that religion is about one's private, confessional experience. It's not, not even here in the United States. When one says "I am a Muslim," "I am a Jew," or "I am a Christian" that person is making an identity statement. Religion is about who you are in an indeterminate world. It's about your worldview.<sup>2</sup>

To confess a creed, a statement of belief, is to locate oneself in a particular historical identity. It's more like saying, "I'm American-Swedish," than it is to fight the battles of

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<sup>1</sup> I have in mind here the postmodern evaporation of reference of language and the burden of *constructed* selves. Little is received. All is burden on self to construct. Such is the postmodern notion of freedom.

<sup>2</sup> Nathan Schneider, "Religion Gone Global: An Interview with Reza Aslan," *The Immanent Frame* at <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2010/05/27/religion-gone-global>.

Nicea or Chalcedon all over again by describing ones faith in painfully parsed Aristotelian language.

Martin Luther had a big advance over the understanding of the trinity as he received it from Nicea. For Luther, and I think he's right here, the trinity should not be approached speculatively, philosophically, but as the unfolding of the gospel. The trinity is how we hear what God has to say to us.<sup>3</sup> The trinity is what God *does*, how the good news is experienced. So, with that introduction in mind, let's look at the trinity.

God is our whence and our wither. It is from the gracious blessing of God that we originate. It is with the redeeming God of history that we are right now, in this present. And it is toward the surprising promises of God that we are drawn. Past, present, future: God is our whence and our whither.

God is our whence. You and I are cast, thrown into life with all of creation.<sup>4</sup> We neither chose nor designed this existence. Blessed, we find ourselves here on this spinning planet.

The creation story has much beauty and mystery. I do not take that account as science. Nor is this story only poetry. There is surplus here of beauty and mystery for centuries of both human poetry and science. The story attempts no comprehensive account of how things exactly happened. This is a story that moves to the *who* without details of the *how*. There is more here than you and me. There is more here than consciousness, intelligence, feeling, pathos, or human thriving. Behind and in it is God, moving, shifting, initiating, responding, and creating. God is our whence.

I believe that God created me, together with all that exists. He has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties. In addition, God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children, fields, livestock, and all property – along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life. God protects me against all danger and shields and preserves me from all evil. And all this God has done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all! For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.<sup>5</sup>

God is our whence. And God is in our present.

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<sup>3</sup> Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology; A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. by Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 335. Not all would agree with Luther, or Bayer's interpretation of Luther. Pannenberg, Barth, Carl Braaten, and Eberhard Jüngel are ready examples that *begin* theology with the trinity. They see the trinity as indispensably central. For Luther the trinity is our experience of God before it is speculative philosophy.

<sup>4</sup> C.f., Martin Heidegger and *Geworfenheit*, or the "thrownness" of existence.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther, "Small Catechism," 1529, *The Book of Concord*, Ed. by Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 2000), p. 354-5.

The planet did not go just as God intended. Reading just the next few chapters in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, the creation almost gets away from God. Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden. Cain kills Abel. In the story of the flood, God vows to wipe everything out and start again. And that is just the beginning of it.

God is frustrated. God is angry. But your God doesn't give up or start over. God lures a whole creation back. In the present. God does that now, today. This is the God who restlessly redeems. Creation tries to rebel, but in the end is not successful. By God's suffering power, God calls creation back today.

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also true human being, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned human being. He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious body and with his innocent suffering and death. He has done all this in order that I may belong to him, live under him and his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he has risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true.<sup>6</sup>

God is our whence, that is where we are from. God is in our present, the now. And God is our whither, where we are going. Cast as we are like aliens into creation, we wander for a lifetime seeking home again. God is our whither.

The last time I took my father to visit his childhood home in Lincoln County, South Dakota he was ninety-five years old. Stopping at one of our relatives, cousin Roy and Hazel, my father pointed at various horizons and named off the family names of the homesteads. "There is where the Ingebritson's lived, and over there is the Thormodsgaard place," he would say. But times had changed. As my father named them, Roy caught my eye. He whispered into my ear, "Those people," Roy said, "have been gone for seventy-five years."

My father sighed as we drove back to the city, "It's just too painful. Everything I've known is gone. It's a whole new place now." It was the last time my father went home. The hymn says it most poignantly, "Time like an ever flowing stream soon bear us all away."

There is something of the grinding reality of pathos in that. Thrown into the world eventually our wandering is all we have. Home recedes from us. It is as though we are lost and cannot find our way home. Barbara Rossing recounted the episode in an Ann Lamont book in which a lost little girl is helped by the police in finding her way home. They drove and drove about the neighborhood. Finally, they drove past a church. "That's my church," the little girl cried. "You can let me out right here. I can find my way home from my church."<sup>7</sup> God is our whither.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 355.

<sup>7</sup> Rocky Mountain Synod, ELCA, Theological Conference, January, 2005.

Understanding may push. But a promise pulls. God is our whither that pulls us in our wandering into God's future. Sometimes one's next step can only be accounted for by a promise called in from the future. Our future is gathered in God's promise.<sup>8</sup>

I believe that by my own understanding or effort I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps in with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith. Daily in this Christian church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all my sins – mine and those of all believers. On the Last Day the Holy Spirit will raise me and all the dead and will give to me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true.<sup>9</sup>

The Trinity scares some people. Perhaps it is a product of our thinking that we need to understand and believe every detail in order to avoid heresy ourselves. I can understand that describing the Christian faith in Aristotelian terms might be a little off-putting for us.

Belief and doctrine is important, but even more important is locating yourself in an historical stream known as the Christian faith. We live in an age of identity, and the trinity is a language of locating that identity.<sup>10</sup> A Christian creed as a shorthand for what your God has done, is doing, and has promised to do for you in the future. It is possible to confess that Trinitarian belief without fully understanding it.

God is our whence and our whither. Having come from God, we return to God. We are cast into creation, and we are coming home. Today, right now we are suspended between original blessing and future promise. Live your life by any other promise and it shall be out of scale, inadequate, to your blessing. Settle for any other promise and life will become smaller.

God blesses, redeems, and brings us home again. May this triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit bless and keep you today and to the close of the age. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> “*The Trinitarian nature of God is the inner structure of the promissio.*” Italics in original. Bayer, p. 341.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 355-6.

<sup>10</sup> The modern interplay between identity received and identity constructed is provocatively treated in Reza Aslan, *How to Win a Cosmic War: God, Globalization, and the End of the War on Terror* (New York: Random House, 2009).