

“The Trinity in the Old Testament”

Exodus 3: 1-6

Trinity Sunday B, Boise, 2021

Both the Epistle and Gospel we read today tell us how the Persons of the Divine Trinity work together to redeem mankind. The Father gives us both the Son and the Spirit to bring us back to Him. The Gospel speaks of the Spirit's regeneration of the believer, as well as the manifestation of the Father's love in the incarnation of His Son [Jn 3: 1-16]. In the Epistle, St Paul speaks of the Spirit's work in the adopted sons of God of mortifying sinful deeds of the flesh, making sin dead; and also of the Spirit's giving us the ability to pray as God's children, to address Him as Our Father. We are allowed to pray thus, because by the grace of adoption we have been made “fellow heirs with Christ,” God's eternal Son by nature [Rom 8: 12-17].

But for today's sermon on Trinity Sunday, I will have us study our OT reading, an account in Exodus of Moses' encounter with God at the Burning Bush. What does that have to do with the Trinity? If you have studied much Church history, you know that the development of Trinitarian doctrine began with some asking the question, What is the relation between the Divine Father and His Son? Are Both eternal? Are They Both God, and God in the same sense; and if so, how are They one God and not two? Because some clergy in the early centuries were giving incorrect answers to those questions, the Church, using the Ecumenical Councils as their vehicle, guided the faithful on the matter, and the summary of that guidance is now our Nicene Creed: Our Lord Jesus Christ is “eternally-begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, [and] of one Being with the Father.” If you want to know what each of those phrases means, you can take my Inquirers' Class the next time it runs.

But the doctrine of the Trinity and the part of it we are now talking about, the relation between the Father and the Son, was not an innovation. The language of the doctrine developed mainly in the 4th century, but its substance comes from Scripture itself, and can be found in the OT as well as the New. Let us now look closely at the passage we read today, drawn from Exodus. Moses is neither in Egypt or the Promised Land. He is in the wilderness of Sinai, where he has taken a wife, and is now tending his father-in-law's sheep. He takes the flock to Horeb, Mt. Sinai, "the mountain of God," and there "the Angel of the LORD [appears] to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush, and, behold, the bush [is] burning yet not consumed." Let us make our first pause here. "Angel," in both Hebrew and Greek, means "messenger." This one is the Messenger of the LORD — LORD written in capital letters, which in the Biblical text is a pious substitution for God's Name, Yahweh. The readers in the synagogue did not want to use that Name, lest they take it in vain while suffering a lapse in concentration and entertaining a stray thought. So whenever they encountered the 4-letter holy Name of God, the readers of the Biblical text substituted the word "Adonai," Hebrew for Lord. That oral custom worked its way into the Greek translation and most subsequent ones of the OT, including the one we read today. So the Messenger, or Angel, that Moses meets at the Bush is the Messenger, or Angel, of Yahweh.

Now let us continue our reading.

And Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not consumed." When Yahweh/the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here am I." Then He said, "Do not come near; take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground. . . . I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Now as I was reading that, did you notice the switch? We began with Moses' encountering the Angel of Yahweh, but when the Angel speaks from the bush, He has become simply "Yahweh," "the LORD." So which is it, Yahweh or

His Messenger? Is there something left out here? Are the translators relying on a corrupt text?

Well, no, for the same sequence has already occurred in the Patriarchal narratives — several times. Abraham and his grandson Jacob each see the Angel of Yahweh appear, and then when the Angel begins to speak, He is in the text simply Yahweh, the LORD. The Angel, when His appearance is described, has the form of a man. Jacob, after crossing the river Jabbok, encountered such and wrestled with Him in the night. At the break of day, Jacob received his reward for wrestling through the night: the man-like figure blessed him and renamed him Israel — why? — because as his wrestling partner tells Jacob, “You have striven with God and man and have prevailed” [Gen 32: 28]. Case in point: God’s Messenger, having the appearance of a man, turns out to be God Himself.

But now the question needs to be asked: if, in these appearances of God’s Messenger, the Messenger is really God Himself, are the initial appearances false? Was God just pretending before making Himself known, like Athena, the goddess who in the Odyssey kept showing up in disguise? There is no indication of deception in these stories in the Bible. A better explanation, some scholars of the OT say, is that they describe two Yahwehs, the LORD whose message the Angel bears, and the Angel Himself, a Person distinct from the first. Such is not merely a Christian interpretation of the Hebrew text. It is one based squarely on the text itself. As I said, the passage we read today is one of a large set, and the pattern is always the same. Abraham, Jacob, Moses, or Joshua encounters the Angel of Yahweh, or a Man who turns out not really to be a man, and when the Angel or man-like figure speaks, it is then revealed that the speaker is God.

St John’s Gospel in the NT brings the two Yahwehs, the one the Messenger of the Other into sharper focus. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Even before the Incarnation, the Divine Father communicated with men and women through His Son. According to the commentary of the ancient Church Fathers, it was the Son whom Moses met and

talked with at the Burning Bush. The Son was bearing the message of God the Father. And wherever God's Word is present, the Word who would later become incarnate, there is also God's Breath, the Third Person of the Trinity. The Spirit is explicitly mentioned in other OT passages, and in the NT He, too, is revealed to be a Person. Each of the Three Persons is Yahweh, the LORD, the Almighty God, Maker of Heaven and earth, and mankind's Redeemer. They co-operate in a unified action, with each operation of Theirs originating in the Father, executed by the Son, and coming to fruition through the Spirit.

It is a good thing to know God as He has revealed Himself, as a Trinity of Persons sharing the undivided Being that is God. But please don't think for a minute that such knowledge is all theory. It guides us in our listening to God and understanding what He wants us to do. We hear Him in His Word, who is the Son, and we comprehend that Word by the power of the Holy Spirit, God's Breath breathed into us and empowering our understanding. We can have no knowledge of God, none that will do us any good, except by His Word and His Spirit.

And when we respond, praising or petitioning the Almighty after having listened to Him, we do that, too, through the Son and Holy Ghost. In most of our corporate prayers that we offer here, we address the Divine Father through His Son, the Mediator, and by the power of the Spirit given to the Church at Pentecost and to each of us at our baptism. We pray to God, through God, and by God in us. Knowledge of the Trinity is, in the final analysis, practical. It directs the Christian's practice.

+