



ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

Episcopal Church & Student Center

1309 R Street * Lincoln, NE 68508 * (402) 474-1979 * www.stmarks-episcopal.org

The Rev. Ryan Hall
Sermon for Trinity Sunday
St. Mark's on the Campus
May 15, 2008

“National Bad Preaching Sunday”

Genesis 1-2:4	Psalter: Canticle 13	2 Corinthians 13: 11-13	Matthew 28: 16-20

TODAY is the day in the church year which I like to refer to as “National Bad Preaching Sunday.” Officially, this is Trinity Sunday, and everything, at least in theory, has to do with the Trinity in some way, shape, or form.

One definition I have heard for insanity is the doing of the same thing over and over again in the hopes that the end result will somehow be different. I believe this is the case for Trinity Sunday because many a preacher every year falls into the trap of trying to explain the whole of the Trinity, and as is often the case when one tries to define something that is infinite into a finite sermon of ten minutes or so, the preacher will *always* fail miserably.

I realized as I was researching for this sermon that this fixation that clergy have to try and explain the whole of the Trinity in single sermons goes back for centuries. I read one such sermon from a monk named Evagrius of Pontus, of whom I had never heard of, who lived in the 4th century, the whole text of which can be found online, that went on for page after page, all of which was about the Trinity.

I bring this up because, after perusing most of it, I was amused to find that Evagrius, after going on for what much have been a sermon that lasted well over an hour, and apparently feeling that he was not getting anywhere with his audience, abruptly ended his sermon (no doubt to the *great* relief of his congregation) by saying,

“God can simply not be grasped by the mind, for if God could be grasped, he would finite and therefore God would not be God.”¹

But, in all seriousness, this aspect of wanting a quantifiable definition of God (especially when it involves the concept of the Trinity) is not just a modern idea; Christians have been wrestling with this issue for centuries. Although we of all people, as modern Americans, like scientific rationales for things, things we can look at under a microscope or can test with the old “scientific method” with hypotheses and clinical trials.

¹ . Evagrius. *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*. Translated by Robert E. Sinkewicz. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.)

Unfortunately, as our new friend Evagrius of Pontus finally stumbled upon after much pontification so many centuries ago, God simply cannot be fully grasped, controlled, dissected, or defined in a neat little definition or equation that balances out nicely.

There is a wonderful little line near the end of C.S. Lewis' book, *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, (a sequel of which came out in the theaters this weekend). In the scene after the 4 Pevensie children have been crowned the Kings and Queens of Narnia, the youngest, Lucy, is suddenly distraught because she has realized that the lion, Aslan, has suddenly disappeared without Lucy getting the chance to say goodbye. (If you are not familiar with the books, Aslan is the Christ figure in all 7 of the Narnia novels).

To console Lucy, Old Mr. Tumnus, the fawn, responds, "One moment, you'll see him, and another you won't. After all...he's not a tame lion."²

C.S. Lewis never really carries that metaphor about Aslan any further, but I have always found that to be a very interesting description of God because what is insinuated, though not directly stated, is that Aslan (that is to say God) is, in fact, an untamed lion, dare I even say, a *wild* lion. [PAUSE]

Perhaps that idea that God is more like a wild lion than a tame lion is shocking to you. Contemporary, mainstream Christianity loves to portray God as this (to quote 1990's slang) "a big, warm fuzzy," something akin to a teddy bear of your childhood or the mellow family hound dog or even in some contemporary Christian artwork especially in those cheesy e-mail forwards that people feel they must unleash upon unsuspecting clergy, the picture of the cute, peaceable-looking lion with a lamb cuddled neatly in his mane.

But is God really nothing more than a big, domesticated cat that sits in your lap and purrs on occasion when you want to lavish some attention upon him? Is that really the God of the bible, that unexplainable mystery which we call and understand as the Trinity?

Instead of falling any further into the homiletic trap of trying to explain the Trinity in 10 minutes or less, I believe it is more helpful for us to examine one of the many attributes of God that we learn from the readings that we have today in the lectionary.

We are, as the scripture tells us, made in the "likeness and image of God" so, therefore, if we begin to study an attribute of God perhaps we may learn something about our own selves, or at least what God would wish us to be.

It is this same, mysterious, wild lion, the god that we call the Trinity, that we encounter in the reading from Genesis. Much is made about this story in pop culture, whether this reading of scripture is literal truth or not...creation versus evolution and *all that*.

I have always been somewhat saddened that such a beautiful and theologically rich story about God and creation has been hijacked by this ongoing discussion of how the world was created. The nuts and bolts of *how the world was created* is not the point of this story. The important question this text explains to us, if we are wise enough to rise above the superficial, cultural debate over the text, is not *how*, but *why* the world was created.

A reading one *can* take away from this story about the creation is that God is this all-knowing, detached, and omnipotent being floating about like a great, albeit bored, primordial magician who needs a hobby and on a lark creates the vast expanse of interstellar space out of nothingness.

2 . Lewis, C.S. *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1994.)

What is often missed in contemporary discussions of this text is that while God, like the wild lion Aslan, is an independent, omnipotent being, God uses His independence to create a world, *not* of total dependence *nor* independence, but creates a world of *interdependence*.³

There are numerous examples of this if you look closely at the text.

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was without form and void and darkness covered the face of the deep.”

God creates from already existing matter. Before light is even created, God is already from square one in a relationship with what is already there.

Looking at verses 11-13 of the first chapter, God begins another interesting relationship: "Let the *earth* bring forth vegetation," and, we are told, "the earth brought forth." This is not a unilateral act of creation, a relationship is involved. God is not doing it all, for the earth is allowed to participate.

Then again, we come back to that verse I quoted earlier (Verse 26, which is the middle of the first column of the scripture insert), God proclaims, “Let *us* make humanity in *our* image, according to *our* likeness.”

To whom is God speaking, exactly? [PAUSE]

Early Christians immediately saw this as an Old Testament reference to what would become more formalized in the doctrine the Trinity. Modern Old Testament scholars think when this was first written down into a scroll, the scribe or priest from the Old Testament times in antiquity probably had in mind a divine council of some kind, much like what we refer to in the Eucharistic prayer every week, “with Angels, and Archangels, and with all the company of heaven.”

But whatever is meant here by the use of the plural, the fact remains that this wonderful story gives us a glimpse, not of a unilateral God working in a completely unilateral way, but of the communal nature of God for God creates a community (of humans) from an apparently already pre-existing community of some kind.

Thus, when C.S. Lewis and others refer to God as a wild lion, that is not necessarily an image to be feared. Wild does not necessarily mean a violently, vicious “King of the Jungle” a title to which Lions used to be referred.

Wild simply means “not tame or domesticated, but living in a state of nature.”⁴ And in this instance, the nature of God is in relationships and in community. And we see this, literally, from the very beginning of this holy book we call the bible.

There are many, very well meaning, Christians out there who will come up and ask you something like, “Are you saved?” Please don't get me wrong, I am not bad mouthing Christians like that, because those are the types of Christians who are proactive in trying to bring people into the church, something we polite Anglicans want to shy away from because we don't want to offend anybody.

But often people who ask that question come from a branch of Christianity that is distinctly American in that it is a theology of rugged individualism (something of which Americans can never seem to get enough) and all that we need as individual Christians is a relationship of “me and Jesus,” as if once that is obtained, one's spiritual journey has reached its conclusion and everyone lives happily ever after.

3 · Fretheim, Terence E. *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005).

4 “Wild.” Definition from www.dictionary.com accessed on 5/15/2008

But that is not quite the whole story. Just as the Trinity is some mysterious relationship between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit that we can never fully understand, that same wild lion does what we do not expect and calls us *not just* into a relationship with Himself, but also equally calls us into a relationship with one another.

And that is the hard part about being a Christian because there is always someone (and if we are really blessed, more than just one) in our lives, in our community, that we would just as soon not have to deal with. But that is not our calling

We have a Lion in our courtyard, traditionally a symbol of St. Mark. But that Lion is also a symbol of that same Lion of Judah that we try to follow, that wild lion that does not do what we expect, calls us to a community we do not expect.

As we come to the Eucharist and through the week, let us, as St. Paul reminds us today, to “offer each other a holy kiss, and let all meditate on the words of that great Lion of our faith saith, so that it may be true of all of us in this community:

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all they heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”⁵

AMEN.