EXTRAORDINARY ORDINARY TIME
Scripture: John 3:1-17

FOCUS: As we encounter our wonderfully mysterious God in God’s triune form we are empowered to live extraordinary lives during ordinary time.

Today is Trinity Sunday. On this day preachers all around the globe are called upon to do what I consider to be an impossible task. We who preach the gospel are expected by many of the faithful to explain what is perhaps the most difficult of all the theological concepts of our faith. The truth is that the concept of the trinity makes no logical sense. Any elementary kid with even a limited aptitude for math can tell you that you just cannot make three and one equal. And the truth is that as we encounter this triune God and consider the different ways God interacts with us it rather seems that we are dealing with three vastly different, even at times incompatible, personas.

If you read all the lectionary texts for today you surely noticed that they paint very different pictures of the God with whom we are called to interact. In both the Old Testament text from Isaiah and the Psalm we encounter that awesome God about which we sometimes sing. Isaiah writes of a vision he encountered while in the temple for worship. There were angelic creatures flying around, each with six wings. God’s presence loomed so large that the hem of his robe alone filled the temple, the largest and most magnificent structure of the day. When the angelic voices celebrated the glory of God the massive pillars supporting the temple were shaken. Clearly the image Isaiah witnessed is that of a larger than life God who is more than a little fearsome, and certainly awe inspiring.

In Psalm 29 we read of God’s glory, strength and splendor. We are reminded of the ongoing creative power of God and of the awesome forces of nature over which God has control, winds both gentle and raging, waters both still and rushing, thunder and lightning. We are told that above all of it, God sits on his throne, forever in control. The psalmist instructs us to honor the glory and strength of God as we worship and calls upon us to rely upon God for strength and peace.

It is no wonder that, having encountered such a powerful and awesome God, Isaiah calls out: ***“Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips.”*** Like each of us, Isaiah had brokenness, sin, in his life. Confronted by the magnificent presence of God he felt unworthy. And he was, as are we. There come times in all our lives when we need to cry out before an awesome creator God, ***“Woe is me.”***  We are all occasionally unclean. It may not be our lips, it might be our minds, or our attitudes, or our obsessions, but whatever the particular filth, we all have some which need to be burned away as was Isaiah’s guilt by the symbolic touching of his lips by a red hot coal.

This week, in our Old Testament readings, we encounter the awesome, creative and powerful presence of God. But what a different picture was painted in the text from Paul’s letter to the Roman church. There we find a very different picture of the paternal God. Here we encounter, not the awesome, fearful creator, rather we find the presence of a loving, compassionate and kind “daddy” figure. The Hebrew “Abba”, which was carried over into Greek, is a term of endearment. Nathan Nettleton, a pastor in Australia, tells of an encounter which brought to life the picture of God as Abba. He was in line, he calls it a queue, at the bank one afternoon. In line in front of him was an elderly Jewish gentleman. While they were waiting a Jewish mother with two small children came in, and one of the children, recognizing the elderly gentleman as her grandfather rushed up to him jumped in his arms shouting joyously “Abba, Abba” That is precisely the picture of the God we serve which Paul sought to paint for us. We are reminded by his words that ours is that loving, daddy kind of God, into whose arms we may fall, or jump as the case may be, without hesitation, knowing we will be welcomed, and will be embrace with an unconditional love.

So we come to the text we have read this morning from John’s gospel. It is the most familiar passage in all of the New Testament. Well, not exactly, one verse is the most familiar, but we need to look much deeper if we are to gather all the wisdom God has for us here. We find in these verses a precursor of things to come as Jesus speaks of being lifted up, as the serpent was lifted up by Moses in the wilderness. At one point during their 40 years in the wilderness the wandering Hebrew people’s camp had become infested with venomous snakes. God instructed Moses to craft a bronze snake and to lift it up on a pole. God then proclaimed that anyone bitten who looked upon the bronze snake on the pole would be spared, saved from an almost certain death.

Clearly Jesus is making reference to his crucifixion. Just as the wandering Jews in the desert were saved from a horrible death by looking up to that bronze snake, all whose spirits look up to the crucified Christ will find life both abundant and unending. For those wondering in the wilderness God provided a way of salvation from the vipers. For us and for all people for all time God provided a way of salvation from the curse of sin in the life death and resurrection of Jesus.

But crucifixion? Here we find what is on the surface a most puzzling and disturbing image of God. It makes perfect, logical sense that the God who created us and everything around us is awesome, powerful and at times fearful. And we gladly embrace the image of the grandfatherly Abba, the parent who loves and embraces us, even when we don’t deserve it. But what about this God who suffers and dies, apparently helpless before the violence and rage of a hate filled and self serving people? How does all this fit together?

Who could blame us if we conclude that God must have multiple personalities? And maybe that is the best way of thinking about it. After all if they are all good personalities isn’t that a good thing? We mere mortals categorize multiple personalities as a disorder, and for those who struggle with such it is indeed debilitating. But in God’s case it is truly a blessing. It is a blessing because it offers to us the personal and intimate relationship with a God who comes to us in different and wonderful ways, to meet our many different needs.

So, it is my task on this Trinity Sunday morning to explain exactly how all this works. That is what you pay me for, isn’t it? Or is it? I hope that is not my task, for if it is I will certainly fail miserably. I will fail because I don’t even understand it all myself. How can I explain to you that which remains a mystery to me, that which I don’t fully understand? I can’t. But that does not mean that I have nothing to offer concerning this matter of the trinity. As I am fond of saying, whether you tire of it or not, there is a big difference between understanding and experiencing. Our faith is far more about experience than is it about explanation.

There are plenty of theologians and scholars who more than willing to offer lengthy and highly technical dissertations on the intricacies of the subject of the Trinity. But none that I have found really explain it. I don’t fully understand how three can be one. I can’t tell you exactly how I know that this God of multiple personalities manages to touch my life in so many different ways.
But I know God does. Again this week, as the spring storms came and moved through we were made aware of the ever changing, unsettled nature of the wind. At times it was gentle, sometimes it was nonexistent, at other times it was strong enough to affect our driving.

As I thought about those winds I recalled the Pentecost scripture from last week and the way the Spirit came. As a mighty wind, unpredictable, uncontrollable, and totally mysterious. I recalled what Jesus said in our gospel lesson. ***“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”.***

I really like the wind images in scripture, they reflect the way I have experienced God, different, unpredictable, unimaginably wonderful and often inexplicable. We often say in the church that the Trinity is a mystery. Perhaps that should give us a clue that we are not likely to solve all its riddles any time soon, any time in this lifetime for that matter. Remember, the Christian faith is not about explanations, it is about experience and about a relationship with a living God. I think that may be one of the reasons some of us find it so difficult to witness, to share our faith with others. We think we need to explain it all, and so often those who try revert to pat answers and religious jargon that makes little or no sense those on the unfamiliar with kingdom matters. We may even use jargon that frankly makes little sense to us if we will be honest with ourselves.

Think about the most important relationships in your life, your spouse, your parents, your children, your best friend. How would you explain those relationships to another? You would probably use words like love, appreciate, cherish, but those are all relational, they don’t really explain anything they simple describe emotions. Yet when we speak of family to others, they get it, they feel our emotions, they connect with our spirits. So it ought to also be when we seek to share with others the relationship we have with God, through Christ and the Spirit. Leave the jargon at home. Put aside the theology, sure it has a place, but it is not where we ought to begin. You see evangelism is not nearly as off putting as we often make it. It is not primarily about shoving things down folk’s throats or badgering unsuspecting friends or strangers. Evangelism is simply the sharing of good news, that is the literal translation of the word. When we share good news it is rarely accompanied by a detailed explanation, it doesn’t need one, it simply is there.

The Christian faith is not about being able to intellectually solve the riddles of the Trinity. But it is about entering, in faith, into the life of the Trinity, into the constant flowing, loving and life giving movements of the God of mystery and grace. But beware! We only truly enter in through that enigmatic door of second birth. That is another thing we ought not spend too much time explaining to others. It is far easier to simply share the ways we have experienced its effects, perhaps without even using the words.

That said we, like Nicodemus need to wrestle with this whole idea of new birth, we need to wrestle with it and we need to experience it, there is that word again, experience. We don’t have to explain it, but we absolutely must experience it if we are to be all we are called to be. We must be born of God’s Spirit, made new, changed, saved from ourselves. Like Isaiah, we need to encounter the awe and the fire of God’s presence. We need to allow God to burn away our sin, so that we might begin anew. Like Paul, we must allow ourselves to be adopted by God, brought into God’s family so that, under the wings of a loving spiritual daddy, we might inherit the gifts and the responsibilities God offers those who come. We need to put away our fleshly ways, we need to die to self. Then we must open ourselves to the Spirit and the Spirit’s movement. We need to be converted, changed forever, that is what it means to be born again.

When the change comes we are in a very real way new creatures. Our ways, our thoughts, our attitudes will surely seem foreign to those around us. Last week we celebrated Pentecost, today is Trinity Sunday. Beginning next week, all the way through the summer and fall, until the first Sunday in Advent, on November 29, we will be in what the church calendar calls “ordinary time”. But I would submit to you the notion that we are called by Easter, Pentecost and Trinity Sunday to be about living extraordinarily during ordinary times. Just as most of the church year is ordinary time, so most of our lives are lived out in the day to day routines of ordinary lives. But those who have truly been born of the Spirit are equipped live extraordinarily in the midst of the ordinary and mundane matters of daily life. Does that mean we will be perfect? Not even close, but it can still mean that we will be extraordinary. To be sure we will never, in this life, be able to live fully in the Spirit, there is still a lot of flesh left in us all, more in some of us than others! But just to be those who struggle with the tension between flesh and Spirit makes folks extraordinary.

The story is told of Will Campbell, a salty, and radical old Baptist preacher in rural Mississippi who, some years ago, attended the trial of a Klansman accused of murdering a black man. A reporter who was covering the trial noticed during recesses that Campbell seemed to have a close relationship with both the defendant and the family of the murdered man. He would spend significant time talking with each of them. It was obvious that he was a source of comfort to all involved. ***“How is this possible,”*** the reporter, sounding a bit like Nicodemus, asked Campbell. ***“for you to be on positive terms with both the man accused of a hateful, racist murder, and the victim’s family?”*** Irritated by the question, Campbell muttered something about every person being a human being, created by God. The reporter was not satisfied. ***“That just isn’t logical. You can’t care for both the Klansman and the family of the victim. Why do you think you can?” “Because I am a (expletive deleted) Christian.”*** Campbell screamed for all to hear.

You see the reporter was seeing things through the lens of fleshly logic. He could not conceive of the kind of interaction and compassion which can be born of the Spirit. But Campbell, though he may have been in need of a hot coal to cleanse his unclean lips, understood what it meant to be born of the Spirit. He was empowered by that inexplicable triune God to live an extraordinary life in the ordinary places of his daily ministry.

For your sake, for the sake of the community we are called to serve, and for the sake of God’s kingdom, may we leave this place today committed to live extraordinary lives during these ordinary days. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.