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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Isaiah 6:1-8, Romans 8:12-17, John 3:1-17
The Triune Shape of Creation

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

THE PHILOSOPHY PROFESSOR

This is a sermon about the doctrine of creation. I begin with a story from my college days, from my first Philosophy course at the University of Maryland. The professor was impressive to me, as all of my professors were back then. He was older, smarter, better read, and had obviously thought more deeply than I had about many matters. I loved his lectures. Then one day, in a question and answer session, the professor tossed off a line that stunned me. One of my fellow students had raised a point about creation running along in certain patterns. And the professor interrupted the student with these words:

The problem with your question is that it speaks of “creation.” But “creation” implies a “creator.” But there is no creator. So, next question.

But I was a stubborn lad back then, and probably for the first time, I judged a professor to be wrong. Perhaps he was right about the conceptual matter: perhaps “creation” does imply “creator.” But I believed he was wrong about the factual matter. I believed that there is a Creator. I believed in then, and I still do. I am happy to believe it and want you to also!

Let me pause for a moment to make this simple appeal: Mother and father: pray for your young ones when they head off to college. Shocks to the soul await them there. Contemptuous dismissals of the faith of the Church happen again and again for the young people of our land – what? a million times, ten million? -- till we have a generation now who simply take it for granted that there is no creator. My parents had not so much equipped me to argue with the sophisticated professor, but rather had taught me an important *preference*: When the professor declared that there is no Creator, I simply thought to myself, “Well, I prefer the Bible to this teaching.” And that helped carry me along until I could phrase some better arguments. So, that particular dismissal of the faith of the church simply bounced off me. But I fear that for some in that large lecture hall that day, the words of the professor were like daggers piercing their hearts. The professor left them poorer that day and no wiser at all.

Nowadays, looking back on that college scene, I still believe that there is a Creator. I continue to disagree with the professor about his factual claim. But nowadays I have a second conviction: Looking back at that college conversation, I now suspect that the professor might not have understood what the Church means

by “creation,” nor what the Church means by “the Creator.” The professor might have been using the concept in a normal, secular way, but the Church thinks of creation in relationship to the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Apparently some other folks suspect this too: that when it comes to reality, the old words of Hamlet to Horatio still ring true:

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy. *Hamlet Act 1, scene 5*

Stephen Jay Gould, for example, longtime Harvard Professor, a passionate advocate of evolutionary theory, and an agnostic, once noted that he had a good number of colleagues who believed both their science and their religious faith:

Either half my colleagues are enormously stupid, or else the science of Darwinism is fully compatible with conventional religious beliefs—and equally compatible with atheism.¹

Likewise, I was interested to read recently that there seems to be a reconsideration of faith among philosophers here in America:

It is estimated that 10 to 25 percent of all the teachers and professors of philosophy in the country are orthodox Christians, up from less than 1 percent just thirty years ago.²

In this sermon, I want to proceed in two steps in praising and defending our Creator and the doctrine of creation. The first step is negative: I believe that atheists might be deluding themselves. They suppose that they are dismissing God and going on without God, while I suspect that they are really believers in a different god. That is, I claim that faith is part of human life. The question of the truth of a human life, then, is the question whether our faith is true. Not whether we *have* faith, since I am quite sure we do, but simply whether our faith is *true*.

The more positive step is to praise our Triune God. I think that reality is in very good hands – the hands of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

¹ Keller, Timothy, *The Reason for God* (New York: Penguin Group, 2008) p. 89, who, in turn, gives this reference: Stephen Jay Gould, “Impeaching a Self-Appointed Judge,” *Scientific American* 267, no. 1 (1992). Quoted in Alister McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion?* (Inter-Varsity, 2007), p. 34.

² Keller, Timothy, *The Reason for God*, Introduction, who gives this reference: “Defending the Faith,” by Douglas Groothuis, *Books and Culture* (July/ August 2003): 12. See Quentin Smith, “The Metaphilosophy of Naturalism,” *Philo* 4, no. 2 at www.philoonline.org/library/smith_4_2.htm. Today the Society of Christian Philosophers (founded in 1978) includes more than 10 percent of all the teachers and professors of philosophy in the country. For more on this see K. Clark, *Philosophers Who Believe* (Oxford University Press).

THERE ARE NO ATHEISTS

My first step, then: I suspect that there are no atheists on the face of this earth. If you were to plop one down right before my eyes, I still would not believe it. And perhaps the atheist would come to agree with me in the end.

For faith is part of human life. We live by faith – not only the Christian, but also the skeptic. For each of us, there are underlying convictions so fundamental to us that without such convictions we would probably go insane. And yet these convictions are matters of faith. They are not matters of logic or mathematics, nor are they matters of scientific experiment. They are simply the assumptions we make about reality that permit us to carry on.

Let me begin with a curious question posed by Jean Paul Sartre. Other forms of the question can be found in the history of philosophy, but Sartre's version has long caught my fancy. Let me alert you in advance that if his question sounds like nonsense, perhaps that in itself reveals how deeply we live by faith. His question is this: Why is it that my arm does not suddenly turn into a lobster claw? What is to prevent it? A Christian can answer, "The Creator." But the atheist claims not to believe in the Creator, so what explanation does the atheist give for the multitude of assumptions we make about continuity and stability and interconnectedness of one moment to another?

Again: I am not the one I was in the past. Why, then, am I so sure that I am who I was? Or why am I so sure I am *I*?

Consider a rod, something for measuring distance, say, a yardstick. Why do I believe that this yardstick is the same length here as it is over yonder? I know that it says 36 inches in both places, but by what right do we assume that distance remains stable as it moves through space.

Likewise with time. As the aircraft pilot approaches the landing, he or she depends upon regularities of physics, mechanics, Bernoulli's principle, and so on. The pilot depends on these regularities not simply as a theoretical thing, but as a matter of life and death. The welfare of his passengers depends on him getting these things right. And his ability to go home that evening to his family depends on getting things right. Yet, by what authority can he be certain that these regularities will work *this time* too? Granted that there have been certain correlations in the past. They can be accurately described with mathematic formula. But by what right do we assume they will apply this time too? The Christian can answer, I have faith that the principles will work this time too because I have faith in God. But how does the atheist answer?

In fact, a delightful thing about scientific method is that it is forever humble before history. No matter how carefully an experiment is designed, the scientist must humbly wait to see how things actually turn out. That is the best that science can do: it can accurately describe how things have gone so far. But it has no authority for saying how things will go in the future. To be true to itself, it can propose, it can predict, but it must humbly wait to see how things actually go. If things do go as predicted, the Christian can say that that is how the Creator wants

them to go. But what explanation does the atheist give for the continuity of things across time?

Suppose someone lives by this principle: “I will only believe that which can be proved by scientific experiment.” It sounds noble. It sounds disciplined. Yet the odd thing about such a principle is that it itself cannot be proved by scientific experiment. What experiment could prove that the principle is true? At most, I figure that experiments could prove that the principle works a good number of times. But that is short of proving that it always works. So, why believe the principle?

In general, we human beings are built for faith, else we end up in the madhouse. The interesting question is not “Is faith optional in life?” but rather, “Is your faith true?” And the interesting question for life is not “Is there a God,” But “*Who* is your God.” It is Trinity Sunday, and I am recommending the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

THE HAPPY DOCTRINE OF THE TRIUNE GOD

Next, let’s consider the happy doctrine of the Triune God. This gives me a chance to lift up an old, but important theme about the doctrine of the Trinity. This theme uses some Latin words, and at first it might sound abstract and removed from ordinary life, but in the end, it is a happy teaching. It means that life is much more complex and much more hopeful than we might at first suppose, or that even the scientist might suppose. The doctrine goes this way:

The works of God *ad extra* are the joint work of the triune persons,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

That phrase *ad extra* means the works of God that are directed *outside* God. I know it sounds strange, but in theory, God *might not* have made the world. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit could have been content with their own holy fellowship for all eternity. But the Bible teaches that God burst forth in speech. I imagine it to be a kind of ecstasy, a kind of exhilaration, a divine overflowing of love and a delight so strong as to have created the world:

And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. (Genesis 1:3,
KJV)

The Lord burst forth in this happy speech and therefore we are! So are the sun and moon and stars and the dinosaurs of yesteryear.

Such are the works I have in mind: the works of God *ad extra* -- the works of God directed *usward*, toward the world. The doctrine teaches that the works of God *ad extra* are the joint work of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Those are big works! I mean, creation, redemption, and sanctification are the joint work of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In this sermon, I want to focus on creation. My

theme is that whatever exists is surrounded and embraced by the holiest of fellowships. We live and move and have our being within the love, the knowledge and the labors of the three divine persons.

Think back to your Catechism days and recall the interesting shift in verb tense when Luther is discussing the creation:

“I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.”

What does this mean?

Answer: I believe that God *has created me* and all that exists; that he has given me *and still sustains* my body and soul, all my limbs and senses, my reason and all the faculties of my mind, together with food and clothing, house and home, family and property; that he provides me daily and abundantly with all the necessities of life, protects me from all danger, and preserves me from all evil. All this he does out of his pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness on my part. For all of this I am bound to thank, praise, serve, and obey him. This is most certainly true

This shift in verb tense from past tense to present tense reflects the Christian conviction that creation is an ongoing deed of our Triune God. We believe that all three persons of the Holy Trinity are deeply involved with reality. It seems to go like this: God the Father calls you and me and the whole world into being. He says let there be light, let there be oceans, let there be sea creatures and birds in the air, and so on. He does this continually, else we would not be. And he does it with a goal in mind. He judges what he calls into existence to be good, which means that he has a certain intention for the things he calls into being.

But, alas, that which God the Father calls into being faces opposition. Reality is deeply opposed by sin, death, and the devil, and so that which the Father calls into being risks falling short of his good intentions. The Holy Spirit, then, takes what is and pulls it along toward the original good intention. That is, the Holy Spirit guides creation toward what is called the Kingdom of God – a good world in which the wolf dwells in peace with the lamb, there is no more sin, death, dying, or grieving, and the knowledge of the Lord fills every human heart entirely. And God the Son is the Redeemer, the One who keeps the hope at the beginning of things from falling short of the glory of the Kingdom. That is, Jesus overcomes sin, death, and the devil, not with silver or gold, but with his own precious body and blood.

These divine labors are going on continually. And so it is that the works of God *ad extra* are the joint work of the three divine persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Creation, then, does not move according to *evolution*, but according to *revolution*: the Spirit’s continual labors to overturn what is in order to move it toward what ought to be, the Kingdom of God. Evolutionary science, then, might

give good descriptions of what the Spirit has accomplished so far, but will forever be chasing what the Spirit us up to. And I wonder whether evolutionary theory could ever *predict* that reality is moving toward the Kingdom of God?

The doctrine of the Trinity, which we celebrate today, means that reality is in the hands of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each of whom loves us with all his heart. Your existence is no accident, no lucky combination of cosmic dust, but rather the definite will of the divine persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who called you into being, died for you, and intends to bring you into the kingdom.

I close with a quote from John Henry Newman. Along with John Donne, Newman was among the English church's greatest preachers. Newman was one who rejoiced in his place within God's triune work. It pleased him to think that he and you and me are here because the Triune God wants us to be here and has high plans for us:

God was all-complete, all-blessed in Himself; but it was His will to create a world for His glory. He is Almighty, and might have done all things Himself, but it has been His will to bring about His purposes by the beings He has created. We are all created to His glory—we are created to do His will. I am created to do something or to be something for which no one else is created; I have a place in God's counsels, in God's world, which no one else has; whether I be rich or poor, despised or esteemed by man, God knows me and calls me by my name. God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission—I never may know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. Somehow I am necessary for His purposes, as necessary in my place as an Archangel in his. . . . He has not created me for naught. . . . Therefore I will trust Him. Whatever, wherever I am, I can never be thrown away. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him; in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him; if I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him. My sickness, or perplexity, or sorrow may be necessary causes of some great end, which is quite beyond us. He does nothing in vain; He may prolong my life, He may shorten it; He knows what He is about. He may take away my friends, He may throw me among strangers, He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide the future from me—still He knows what He is about. O Adonai, O Ruler of Israel, Thou that guidest Joseph like a flock. . . . Deign to fulfil Thy high purposes in me whatever they be—work in and through me. I am born to serve Thee, to be Thine, to be Thy instrument. Let me be Thy blind instrument. I ask not to see—I ask not to know—I ask simply to be used. —John Henry Newman, “Meditations on Christian Doctrine” in *Meditations and Devotions of the Late Cardinal Newman* (London, 1893), 399-402.

Such confidence in the providence of the Triune God is the birthright of all Christians. The Holy Trinity knows what they are about, and it is good! Life is better than we suppose through our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory now and forever. Amen.