

Psalm 104—Excerpts

Bless the LORD, O my soul. O LORD my God, you are very great.

You make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers.
You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills;
giving drink to every wild animal; the wild creatures quench their thirst.
By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation;
they sing among the branches.

From your lofty abode you water the mountains;
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.
You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use;
bringing forth food from the earth; wine and bread to gladden the heart.

The trees of the LORD are watered abundantly;
in them the birds build their nests.

The high mountains are for the wild goats;
The rocks are a refuge for the rabbits.

You have made the moon to mark the seasons;
the sun knows its time for setting.

You make darkness, and it is night,
when all the animals of the forest come out creeping.

When the sun rises, people go out to their work;
to their labour until the evening.

O LORD, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all.

Yonder is the sea, great and wide;
living things both small and great.

There go the ships;
and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

These all look to you to give them their food in due season;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die, and return to dust.

When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground.

May the glory of the LORD endure for ever;
I will sing to the LORD as long as I live.

I will sing praise to my God while I have being.

May my meditation be pleasing to LORD, for I rejoice in the Creator.

Bless the LORD, O my soul.

Praise the LORD!

Romans 8:18-38—Excerpts

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing to be set free from its bondage of decay. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit. We groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies, and we wait patiently in hope.

The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? God who did not withhold the beloved Son, but gave him up for all of us, will God not with him also give us everything else? Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

“The Trinity—Explain It To Me Again, Please”

On church calendars across the globe today is recognized as Pentecost. Next week is Trinity Sunday. These are terms rarely used outside of church settings. So what is their background and what do these terms mean? Pentecost first.

The word Pentecost (Greek meaning “fiftieth”) appears twice in the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible [Septuagint] as one of the three designated Jewish feasts (Ex 34.22 & Deut. 16.10). It comes 50 days after Passover (our Easter). In Jewish circles before the common era (BCE), Pentecost called for renewal of the covenant God made with Noah (Gen 9.8-17)”, other creatures, and creation itself.¹

Before I started studying church history and rituals of the church, I thought Pentecost was all about we Christians; it didn’t occur to me that Jesus celebrated Pentecost as well. I thought the descent of the Holy Spirit as described in *Acts* (2:1-21), was about empowerment of shattered disciples, the fledgling church and the beginning of missions—all about we Christian people. To a certain degree it is about those things, but it is much bigger than that. The people gathering that day in Jerusalem would have understood that this renewal of the covenant extends to all creation and creatures. The renewals which we experience, our Pentecost moments, are there for personal healing which will bring deeper care to all animals and balance to the eco-systems all around us. Covenants are renewed, and we go forward strengthened to tend the broken covenants all around us. That is Pentecost be it in the Old or New Testaments.

On the church calendar next week is Trinity Sunday. It is very connected to the intentions of Pentecost, so the people cobbling together biblical readings for church services (the lectionary) always place Trinity Sunday after Pentecost. What is this Trinity thing? Think here about Father / Son / Holy Ghost, or in a modern paraphrase Creator / Redeemer / Sustainer. The concept of a Divine Godhead with three coequal partners is a part of many, if not all, the credal confessions (the Nicene Creed, Apostles Creed, Chalcedon Creed) of the larger church, but the image of a “Trinity” isn’t actually found within the Bible. It was a construct of the early church to fend off accusations from Roman authorities on one hand and early church movements which did not value God or Jesus or the Holy Spirit. There are a few places in the New Testament where the ideas of the three in one come together, but not clearly nor often.² The Church elders in those early years wanted to hold together the concepts of Creator (Father), renewal of self and society (Son), and Divine empowerment (Spirit). Well, that is the history lesson for today.

After the historical review, however, I am left wondering what these important festivals on the church calendar really mean for us in the 21st century.

¹ John Frederick Janssen, “Pentecost” in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press: 1993), p. 582.

² Daniel. N. Schowalter, “Trinity” in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, pp 782-783.

Pentecost I kind of get: renewing the covenants God has made with us; and being empowered to speak of the that covenant as it impacts people, plants, and the planet. The Trinity, as one church editorialist put it, is a “great pain” for preachers.³ Not only that, how might we effectively open ourselves to aspects of the trinity; and how we might effectively communicate the interrelationship of these divine characters within our Biblical texts to those unacquainted with them? From here I will explore thoughts why the concept of a Trinity is import for us, our societies, and our planet. I will do so in a trinitarian format.

God

I will not ask how many were able to take in the Aurora Borealis back on May 10th. For those who were there, it was mystical and magical. In an episode of *Nature of Things* David Suzuki speaks into the science of how northern lights come to be, and also the meaning ascribed to such events in northern Canadian communities; they are our ancestors. For some, making a pilgrimage to dwell among the Aurora Borealis has contributed to healing after the death of a loved one.⁴ Sure, scientists can describe the manner by which “the lights” come to be; but describing the feelings and meaning of such amazing natural events belongs more in the domain of philosophy. These moments are saturated in transcendence and mystery.

In our biblical tradition, it is God who is the primary actor from the very beginning and it is both transcendent and mysterious. God speaks words, and creation comes into being. God speaks a word, and a people come into being. God speaks a word, and the church comes into being. Patrick speaks a word, and precious little happens. There is a difference between Patrick and God. The powerful creating and recreating essence of God is a mystery. Perhaps “mystery” or “transcendence” are two of the greatest gifts the God concept within the Trinity has for us in the 21st century.

“This concept of transcendence or otherness is challenging for those of us who grew up in the shadow of the Enlightenment and the corresponding advances in scientific discovery. We are thinkers, shaped by Rene Descartes and his contemporaries. Thinking, knowing, and certainty were the cornerstones of Western thought that made sense of the world. We can know, and knowing reflects our identity. Transcendence sits in contrast to this kind of knowing.”⁵ In these days, maybe always, humanity benefits from a sense of transcendence, awe, humility. But how do we do recover this space of transcendence in our lives?

Ron Ruthruff writes into this question. “If we are to step into the mystery of transcendence, we need the wisdom of the Serenity Prayer (#1007 VT). Reinhold

³ Mary W. Anderson, “Living the Word” in *The Christian Century* (May 20-27, 1998), p. 582.

⁴ [They can be seen from space and 5 other things you didn't know about the northern lights | Nature of Things \(cbc.ca\)](https://www.cbc.ca/nature-of-things/they-can-be-seen-from-space-and-5-other-things-you-didnt-know-about-the-northern-lights)

⁵ Ron Ruthruff, “June 4; Trinity Sunday” in *The Christian Century* (June, 2023), p. 24.

Niebuhr wrote this famous prayer as part of a 1926 sermon; years later it was adopted in shorter form by Alcoholics Anonymous. Acceptance and serenity sit in deep contrast to knowing and certainty. Acceptance and serenity embrace the limitations of being human and rely on the otherness of God...can we suspend our need for control long enough to trust in that mystery?"⁶ The serenity prayer is good—that is the verbal form of “letting go and letting God” as a saying I have heard goes. Stepping out some evening to behold the stars of the sky or the Northern Lights is the experiential equivalent to the serenity prayer.

Before I leave the Creator aspect of the Trinity, I must draw attention to God’s indiscriminate care for creatures named in Ps 104; indiscriminate care indeed! Lions (v.21) and Leviathan (v.26) are nurtured by God; Leviathan even sports about in the water alongside the ships. There is import in such a kindly description of Leviathan. You see, Leviathan was a “mythological sea monster...described as a seven-headed serpent.” Not a friendly face if one is out boating or fishing. In Psalm 74 (v.14) God defeats Leviathan which is a prelude to creation, or possibly re-creation. In O.T. apocalyptic literature, a defeated Leviathan is given as food to the elect (2 Esd. 6.49-52).⁷ The upshot is that Leviathan is one scary marine animal. In Psalm 104, however, it is God who has created the monster and fed it like a pet. How do the monsters of our societies move from being a terror to being part of the peaceable kingdom? It is a mystery, but a few of scriptures speak to such a conversation. And that takes me to Jesus.

Jesus

If God is the transcendent entity within a Trinity, Jesus is the immanent. Immanent means close—the Divine close up. Several places within the New Testament we find this idea of God and Jesus being uniquely connected. John’s gospel declares that Jesus and the Father are one (John 10:31-38). The letter to the *Colossians* (1:15-16) reads, “[Jesus Christ] is the image of the invisible God...for in (or by) him all things in heaven and on earth were created”. *Hebrews* of the NT echoes this sentiment (1:3), “He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he bears along all things by his powerful word”. These texts strongly suggest that Jesus was Emmanuel—God with us.

We humans often learn best through watching and imitating, at least that would be true for me. Way back in high school a few of my friends and I took up tennis. The inspiration was probably Wimboldon or the French open, but we invested in cheap racquets and a can of balls. We were terrible, but it was fun. One year I made an important observation—my game improved considerably after having watched the pros playing on the television. I came to the net and actually

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Michael D. Coogan, “Leviathan” in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, pp 433-434.

volleyed. Both my forehand and backhand were more consistent. My serve actually was above 20 mph and went in. I hadn't taken lessons or practised. It was the power of observing masters of the game ply their trade. After a week or two of relative glory, I reverted to my pathetic play and dropped in the rankings. A lack of attention to the masters or regular play led to regression.

We learn by observation and imitation. Our ethics and morality will be shaped by the people we choose to observe and seek to imitate. When we are giving more time to a political pundit than to reflection on Jesus, we are making a conscientious decision on how our ethics and morality will be shaped. There is something about the quality and character of Jesus which compelled the early church to say—we will pay attention to his words and actions, and we will seek to imitate them. Why? Because his teachings and actions reflected what they believed was divine.

There is also something significant about the death Jesus as well. He was executed during the Jewish festival of Passover. This commemoration is fundamentally about God's liberation of God's people from bondage and slavery. In spite of our flaws, God chooses to preserve us. Sometimes, we will need to die to sin and the powers of the world. God, in Christ, sustains us as we stumble out of Egypt into the Wilderness. As the biblical story often illustrates, we are far from perfect when the Passover happens. There is something powerful in the blood of Jesus which covers the mantel of the doors in Christ's house. The church is not where perfect people gather. Rather, it is an emergency room in which broken people are exposed to the stories, teachings and parables of a Great Physician who bears with us through this world.

Sadly, but a reflection of reality, is that fear often derails even those closest to the Christ. Easter morning accounts have women fleeing the empty tomb in terror (Mk 16:8). Disciples cower in fear behind locked doors (Jn 20:19). Young church workers need encouragement (2nd Tim 1:1-1-7). Sometimes teachings and following after are not enough to shake us from bondage into a journey. Enter third member of the Trinity.

Holy Spirit

I will not say much here about the descent of the Holy Spirit centuries ago or now. I will say that covenant renewals with God, with each other, and with creation happen in the most extraordinary ways. Perhaps we can witness them if we are looking for them; it is one reason we have begun to put "points of progress" in our bulletins. Perhaps we can experience them when we listen to the nudgings of the Spirit within us—consider the actions to which you feel drawn to take to make your world a more grace filled space. These might be divine pulses of encouragement, of inspiration, from the Holy Spirit.

And perfection is not a part of the equation. We learn as go. We make mistakes on the way. Part of the interrelationship between Easter and Pentecost is that the story invites us to keep growing in our trust and courage. To a conclusion.

Speaking of the Trinity

Back in the 4th century St. Patrick used the idea of a Shamrock to describe the Trinity. Three slightly different leaves united in the same stalk. Shamrocks may be in Ireland, but the last Shamrock I have seen was in a bowl of Lucky Charms decades back. There are other ways to conceptualize the essence of the Trinity.

The children's time illustrated three different forms of the same substance. At least that is what it looked like to me. Chemists and biologist, I am sure, could come up with other examples in which one element can take multiple forms.

Mary Anderson wrote the following, "At the age of three I had a memorable experience of the three-in-one. I was watching my grandmother sleep during her afternoon nap. As I contemplated her existence, I thought wisely, "That's Grandmamma, Mamma, and Odelle." She smiled in her sleep as I called her by the names used for her by her grandchildren, her daughter and her husband. Three names, three relationship—and yet the same person. Amazing!"⁸ (end quote)

After the funeral for Gordon Unrau way back in 2018, John Elias and I were visiting at the lunch. He recalled a Trinitarian image used by Gordon at Peace Mennonite in a sermon which was memorable for him and me. "He was speaking of the Trinity (or possibly of the Holy Spirit) and he used a can of 3-in-1 oil. Reading directly off the can he said "It cleans, it protects, it sets free".

The concept of the Trinity, while not technically biblical, is useful. People need to know that they have been created good by a good God. People need to know that Jesus Christ came to remind us of God's liberation of an enslaved people; there is a path out of bondage. Come and see; follow after me, he said. Take my yoke upon yourselves and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt 11:28-30). People need to know that the Spirit of God and Christ will break upon us to inspire us and encourage us even when things seem terrible. As Paul wrote to the church in Rome:

"Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Amen.

Patrick Preheim, pastor of Nutana Park Mennonite Church

⁸ Anderson, Ibid.