

"What God is Like"
Sermon by the Rev. Sudie Niesen Thompson
John 3:1-17 with Isaiah 6:1-8
May 26, 2024 — Trinity Sunday

*What is God like?*¹ This question propelled the late Rachel Held Evans to jot down metaphors that would invite children to marvel at the mystery of our great-big God. After her untimely death, Rachel's friend Matthew Paul Turner carried her project to the finish line — publishing a children's book filled with imaginative text and whimsical illustrations that help readers young and old begin to wrap our minds around the unfathomable mystery of God.

"What is God like?" the book begins. That's a very big question, one that people from places all around the world have wondered since the beginning of time. And while nobody has seen all of God (because God is far too big for any of us to fully see), we can know what God is like.

God is like a shepherd, the book suggests, brave and good, a protector who loves her sheep so much that she watches over all of them and knows each of their names by heart.

God is like the flame of a candle, warm and inviting. With God close by, you can look to the light and see through the darkest of nights.

God is like three dancers, graceful and precise. They move to the same music in very different ways, showcasing all of God's elegance and rhythm in your life.

With image after image, this book pieces together a mosaic. It's not a complete portrait, nor is it intended to be. This book does not claim to capture the fullness of the One who is immortal, invisible, God only wise. Rather, this beautiful mosaic inspires us to wonder, invites us to ponder for ourselves: What is God like?

It is a very big question, one that people from places all around the world have wondered since the beginning of time. In fact, this question — along with many others — compelled our forebears in the faith to wrestle with sacred Scripture, to debate right doctrine, ultimately to articulate certain truths about who God is and what God is like.

One way the early church answered these questions was with the doctrine of the Trinity — the distinctively Christian understanding that God is simultaneously one and three. The church professes one God, distinct in three eternal persons — Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit — who are "united in an eternal movement of mutual self-giving love."²

¹ Rachel Held Evans and Matthew Paul Turner, *What is God Like?* (New York: Convergent Books, 2021).

² Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 427.

Although we regularly affirm our faith in the Triune God, I would guess that most of us don't give the Trinity much thought ... until, of course, we come to Trinity Sunday, the one day in the liturgical year devoted to a doctrine of the church. When people of faith do pause to ponder this holy mystery, I've noticed it's often in a futile attempt to make it make sense. We fixate on the logic of the Trinity, or lack thereof. How can God be both one and three?!? That's not how math works! We desperately reach for comparisons in the natural world: Well, it's like water. Sometimes it's a liquid; when it freezes, it turns to ice; when it heats up, it turns to steam. Three different properties, but it's always H₂O. That's how the Trinity works, right? ... Not exactly ...

Metaphors like this one tend to reduce our infinite God to someone — or even *something* — that finite minds can comprehend. They try to explain the unexplainable, to size-down our great-big-God to fit within limited human understanding, rather than inviting us to ponder with open hearts and open minds: What is God like?

If Nicodemus had been a Christian scholar, rather than “a leader of the Jews,” I imagine he would have been the type to cling to such explanations of the Trinity. He comes to Jesus by night — under the cover of darkness — at a time when his fellow Pharisees won't observe this encounter. Nicodemus is wondering who this Jesus is, what this Jesus is like. His questions compel him to seek Jesus out. But it's clear from the beginning that Nicodemus' heart and mind are not truly open. For he starts — *not* with curiosity — but with what he *knows* ...

Rabbi, Nicodemus begins, *we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.*

It seems Nicodemus has heard of the first of Jesus' signs — when he turned six jars of water into the finest wine. And Nicodemus has drawn his own conclusions about what happened at that wedding in Cana. He has settled on an explanation that fits within his understanding of who God is, of what God is like.

You see, this teacher of Israel — this expert in the law — he *knows* how the Holy One works. He knows that “no one has ever seen God,” as the prologue of John's Gospel plainly puts it. Nicodemus knows that the One who “sits above the circle of the earth and stretches out the heavens like a curtain” is set apart (Isaiah 40:22). This God is so holy that even the prophet Isaiah cannot behold in full the Lord of hosts; this God is so vast that the hem of the royal robe — the hem, alone! — fills the temple. And, yet — Nicodemus knows — the Holy One *can* be present with those whom God sends. So, with confidence, he approaches Jesus: *Rabbi, we know that you ... [have] come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.* Yes, Nicodemus is convinced he *knows* how God works.

But Jesus immediately challenges Nicodemus' understanding: *Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.* Admittedly, this response is as baffling to Nicodemus

as the doctrine of the Trinity is to us. And the Pharisee reacts as many of us would: *What the heck does that mean, Jesus?* (Paraphrase, of course.)

Jesus continues: *I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit ... Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 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.*"

As one commentator puts it, Jesus "seems congenitally incapable of giving a straight answer."³ Nowhere is that more true than in this exchange with Nicodemus. His response leaves us scratching our heads. Jesus' claims require some unpacking ... Not only because they are enigmatic. But because so many Christians have pretended otherwise. They've reduced Jesus' words to a litmus test. Either you're born again, or you're not really Christian.

The first thing to know is that translations of this text inevitably strip the phrase "born from above" of its nuance. The original Greek word holds two meanings — both "born from above" and "born anew."⁴ No single English word can capture both dimensions, so most translations simply choose one. And, in doing so, they flatten Jesus' meaning ... just as Nicodemus does. He hears only the physical dimension, and quickly dismisses Jesus' claim: *Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb?* In fixating on logic, Nicodemus misses Jesus' call to be born anew, of water and Spirit.

The reference to water is a matter of some debate amongst scholars. Does it refer to baptism? Maybe. That's often how it's read. But it could be an allusion to Hebrew Scripture, specifically to prophetic texts that list "[washing in water] and the outpouring of God's Spirit" as signs of the advent of God's new age.⁵ Perhaps "water and Spirit" are actually one and the same thing — just as they are in John chapter 7 — when Jesus promises the gift of the Spirit by saying: *Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water* (7:38).

Whatever Jesus is alluding to when he mentions water, this much is clear: The new birth of which Jesus speaks is a gift of God's Spirit — the wind that blows where it chooses. This gift comes from God, and God alone. It is not something we can accomplish by entering a second time into the mother's womb. It is not something we can claim by declaring we have been "born again." No, the gift of new birth comes from God — the Source of all life — the very One who formed the first human being from the dust of the earth, then breathed into its nostrils the breath of life. At the end of John's Gospel, Jesus mimics this first act of creation when he appears to disciples huddled behind locked doors. The

³ A. D. Nuttall, *Overheard by God: Fiction and Prayer in Herbert, Milton, Dante, and Saint John* (New York: Methuen, 1980), 131, as quoted by: Frances Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 20.

⁴ See, for instance: Gench, *Encounters with Jesus*, 20 and Karoline M. Lewis, *John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 47.

⁵ Gench, *Encounters with Jesus*, 20.

Resurrected Christ breathes the Holy Spirit upon his fearful followers, freeing them from a tomb of their own making and sending them out as apostles of the Risen Lord. With this act of re-creation, Jesus invites them to share with him in the gift of new life. This, it seems, is what it means to be born anew: it means becoming a new creation transformed by the love and grace of One who came that we might have life, and have it abundantly.

This is what Jesus offers Nicodemus as the two converse under the cover of darkness. But Nicodemus can't see beyond his limited understanding of who God is and what God is like. He remains fixated on logic: *How can these things be?*, he asks.

These things can be because of love, Jesus replies. Because God so loved the world that the divine Word "became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood."⁶ Because God so loved the world that it was not enough for the Holy One to stretch out the heavens like a curtain and, then, sit back above the circle of the earth. No God decided to enter into the world God had made by sending, first, the Son and, then, the Spirit. Because love compelled the Creator of Heaven and Earth to draw close to us so that we might draw close to God ... so that we might experience the gift of new life in and through relationship with the Triune God.

This, as it happens, is who God is. Yes — the communion of Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit is eternally relational. The One who exists as three distinct persons "united in an eternal movement of mutual self-giving love," is a God who is oriented to life in community. And the Holy Trinity — one God in three persons, three persons united in one — yearns for relationship with us. That is why the Father sent the Son — to draw all people to himself. That is why God continues to send the Spirit, to *continue* to draw all people close, so that we, too, might experience the gift of new life in and through relationship with the Triune God. So that we, too, might realize just how close God is ...

God is like the wind, the children's book says. *God is like the wind, passionate and full of mystery. God is both here and, mysteriously, also over there. God is everywhere, swirling throughout the world, whistling across mountain ranges, rustling through trees, and pressing against your cheeks on a breezy day.*

A member of the congregation I previously served testified to the power of the unpredictable wind of God that swirls around and within us:

"One morning," she said, "the wind of God blew behind my back, pushing me down the hallway after church ... somehow urging me over to a table where a woman I'd never met was selling water filters for [families in] Guatemala. Before I knew what had come over me I had written a check to buy a filter and had committed to going on the next trip to Guatemala! Even though this all felt right," she continued, "I lay awake the night before that trip thinking, 'What on earth am I doing? I have two [kids] at home! Is this really necessary?'" Obviously, the Holy Spirit seemed to think so.

⁶ John 1:14 (MSG)

“Fast forward a few years,” she said, “and this ‘light breeze’ of the Holy Spirit has turned into more of a tornado — sucking me into a Guatemalan vortex of projects, fundraising initiatives, wonderful friendships, and, of course, more trips.”⁷

By the time I met this woman, she was deeply invested in the congregation’s Guatemala partnership. She visited once — sometimes twice — a year and even organized a trip for the youth of the church. In the years since the wind of God urged her over to that table where a woman was selling filters, she had formed meaningful relationships across barriers of language and nationality, and had seen the impact this partnership had had on the lives of Guatemalan families. As someone who served as her pastor, I can testify to the passion she brought to this ministry, to the purpose she’d found, to the way the Spirit’s sudden movement had given her new life. Through her work in Guatemala, the Spirit had drawn her more deeply into relationship with the Triune God and with the world God so loves. She had been transformed by the love and grace of One who came that we might have life, and have it abundantly.

This is the kind of life that Jesus offers Nicodemus, that Jesus offers all of us. This new life is a gift of God’s Spirit — the wind that blows where it chooses, the wind that draws us more deeply into the heart of God so that we might discover who God is, what God is like.

Nicodemus can not see beyond his own limited understanding — at least, not yet. And, so — for the moment — he rejects the new life Christ offers. At the end of this conversation, the Pharisee slips away into the darkness.

But he does not disappear from the story. It seems that Jesus’ words have left him pondering. It seems the that unpredictable wind of God continues to stir Nicodemus to new understanding, and draws him into deeper relationship with the God made known in Jesus Christ. Because, at the end of the Gospel, Nicodemus returns. He appears at the foot of the cross, bearing “a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.” And — together with Joseph of Arimathea — Nicodemus takes Jesus down from the cross, wraps his body with the spices in linen cloths, and lays it in the tomb (19:38-42). His final act is *not* one of disbelief or doubt, but of devotion.

It seems the Spirit was not finished with Nicodemus. And that shouldn’t surprise us. Because that is the way of the Triune God. The One who is eternally relational. The One who draws close to us so that we might draw close to God. This God won’t let us slip away into the darkness, just because we’re too fixated on logic to grasp the good news or because we can’t see beyond our own limited understanding. Even then, the Spirit still swirls around and within us, inviting us to a fuller understanding of who God is, of what God is like. Offering us, again and again, the gift of new life.

⁷ “Blessed to be a Blessing,” wpc.org.

What is God like?, the children's book asks. *That's a very big question, one that people from places all around the world, throughout all time, have answered in many different ways. Keep searching. Keep wondering. Keep learning about God*, the book encourages us.

And I would echo its call: *Keep searching. Keep wondering. Keep learning about God*. Open yourselves to wonder. Marvel at the mystery of our great-big-God. Because that is the faithful response to a God who is always searching for us, who is inviting us into deeper relationship, who is offering us again and again the gift of new life. Because that is the way of the Triune God. That is what God is like.