June 7, Trinity Sunday (Genesis 1:1–2:4a; Psalm 8; Matthew 28:16–20)

When we read scripture backward

by Greg Carey in the June 3, 2020 issue

Theology, someone must have said, works backward. When something good happens to us, we experience gratitude—so we look back and imagine the hand of God. After a loved one dies, we gather and reinterpret the events of their lives.

So too with biblical interpretation. Early Christians practiced what Richard B. Hays calls “reading backwards.” They turned to the Jewish scriptures, the only scriptures they had, and read Jesus back into them. And so too with the Trinity. Biblical authors may not have articulated such a doctrine in full, but by reading backward, we Christians resource and refine our own trinitarian understandings.

What might it look like to read some of our Trinity Sunday lessons backward?

Matthew’s Great Commission features the New Testament’s most explicit trinitarian language, “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Unlike in 1 John 5:7, there’s no evidence that scribes altered Matthew’s text to fit a later trinitarian theology. The clause figures prominently in ecumenical relations, as some churches only acknowledge those baptisms performed in the name of all three persons of the Trinity. Without spelling out what trinitarian faith looks like, Matthew’s Jesus insists upon the language. Perhaps this is the pattern we should emulate: we may confess the mystery without achieving complete understanding.

Preaching about the Trinity is hard. As a seminary professor, I read students’ faith statements, and I see how they struggle. Fact is, I struggle too. Every time I’m asked a Trinity-related question, I sense I’m standing on the heresy cliff, the ground crumbling under me.

The key to proclaiming the Trinity, I believe, is to remember that it is good news. The Nicene Creed may set boundaries protecting the licit from the illicit: “begotten, not made”; “of the same essence”; “proceeds from the Father and the Son.” But while it rules out wrong ways of imagining the Godhead, it does not specify precisely how these essences, identities, and relationships work. Instead, the creed tells a story: the one God created everything; Jesus Christ lived, died, rose, and will return for us and for our salvation; the Holy Spirit has spoken through the prophets, has formed the church, and grounds our hope. Our confession, story-shaped as it is, testifies that one God is fully present in creation, in Israel’s journey, in the ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus, and in the Spirit’s empowerment of the church.

Reading backward, our Hebrew Bible lessons do not proclaim the Trinity, despite God speaking about “us” and the presence of God’s “Spirit” (or “wind” or “breath”) at creation. Picking up on the image of God’s Spirit/wind traversing the primeval waters, Israelite wisdom traditions themselves deploy striking language that challenges the boundaries of monotheism. Proverbs depicts Woman Wisdom’s presence at the beginning of creation (8:22–31; see also Wisdom 9:1–4; Sirach 24:1–7), language John’s Gospel appropriates in introducing Jesus as the divine Logos (1:1–5).

Instead, Genesis 1 and Psalm 8 marvel that the creator of a spectacular cosmos would relate so intimately to humankind. The first creation story in Genesis sets forth a deity who creates all things good, albeit from a distance. Yet when God sets out to create humankind, the story slows down. Three times affirming that God created humankind in God’s image, the narrative transitions from stately prose to verse. God affirms all of creation step by step, but only humankind receives explicit blessing. This creation account presents a God whose transcendence does not rule out intimacy.

Psalm 8 likewise embraces the tension between divine transcendence and intimacy. The psalm begins by sounding out God’s glory “above the heavens” and surveying the expanse of the cosmos. The psalm marvels that God would take notice of puny mortals, yet somehow God bestows a near-divine status upon humankind: little lower than God’s own self. Psalm 8 echoes the language of Genesis 1, affirming humankind’s “dominion” over other created beings.

At the end of the day, the doctrine of the Trinity is good news, worthy of celebration. It affirms the whole of the gospel: that the God who created the world, called

Abraham and Sarah, blessed and healed in Jesus, and now empowers the church through the work of the Holy Spirit is one God. All these blessed realities constitute a whole. It also acknowledges the relationality core to the divine mystery. We worship a great and transcendent God, who from the beginning and throughout history draws near to humankind with love and blessing. “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, indeed?”

I am writing this reflection while practicing social distancing at home. Young adults are at the dinner table, doing their academic work online. My partner is handling her business at the breakfast table. Churches are worshiping virtually. Extended family, friends, and colleagues are available only by phone. Who knows how things will be when this column appears in print? In this moment, however, I treasure the divine relationality that binds us together in a single divine blessing.