

Today is a unique day for us as Christians! Much of the western world celebrates Christmas, and Easter – everywhere else in the Christian world called “Pascha”, meaning “Passover” has significant echoes of the Jewish festival of the same name. Pentecost is the Jewish Festival of Weeks – harvest – with some unique twists. But there’s nothing like this day – no one else celebrates God as “Three-in-one and One-in-three”! This is all ours!

So what is this day?! It’s about our image, our metaphor for God. What’s your image, your metaphor for God? How about there’s this old, white guy with long, flowing hair, sitting on a huge, regal throne, with a bunch of people in white robes standing around worshipping him.

That’s Revelation’s vision – almost! Revelation chapter 4 describes the one sitting on the throne as being like “jasper and cornelian” - they’re both mostly red colors, so it has to be an old Red Guy – who knew that God was a native American?!

Problem #1, therefore, is that it’s easy for us to create God in our own image! We have an internal metaphor – even a set of metaphors – for God that was formed by the time we were about six and often doesn’t change much....unless we’re open to that possibility.

Problem #2 is highlighted by today’s gospel passage where we see Nicodemus being very human – very much like each of us. The passage says that Nicodemus comes to Jesus with what he knows (“I know that...”). He ends with questions about what he doesn’t know. He arrives fairly confident that he has a good grasp on who Jesus is; he leaves being encountered by the mysterious God in the flesh – he leaves with more questions than answers.

The journey of faith is often like that – one answer simply leads to the next question, simply draws us deeper into the mystery that is God, the universe, everything.

The Nicodemus story is a great way into thinking about the Trinity We, like Nicodemus, start out with what we know: “I know that God is three-in-one and one-in-three”. So often, though, we end up saying both “ yes, God is like that,” but also “no, God is not exactly like that,” we end with more questions than we started with.

That’s okay. In fact it’s helpful to come to that recognition – to grasp that if we are faithful in our task we will – and will always – reach the limit of human words and cross over into the language of metaphor. The bible does that about God all the time – the bible uses metaphor to help us transcend the literalness of our minds and soar into those images that transform us.

All of which means we need to be cautious when it comes to a literalist approach to scripture. As Rabbi Benjamin Sylva has said: *"A literalist interpretation of Scripture tells us that God is a rock that sent a bird to cause a virgin to give birth to a loaf of bread. And this is supposed to be an improvement on obtaining a chiseled code of conduct from a flaming shrubbery in a cloud [?] If a literal understanding is all that is required for faith, then I'm a yellow ducky."*

That’s a great quote! How many descriptions of God in that quote? Two obvious ones: 1). Rock, 2). Flaming Shrubbery. And if you want to take a step into Christian theology we’d have to say

four: add 3) a bird, and 4) a loaf of bread. So now we have four descriptions of God.

Now how about we go beyond the quote, and ask just about the descriptions of God in the scriptures of our Jewish brothers and sisters, in the Old testament: 5) a shepherd (the 23rd psalm), 6) a potter (Isa. 64:8), 7) a rock and fortress (Psalm 18:2), 8) an eagle who teaches her young to fly and carries them on her wings (Deut. 32:11 and Exod.19:4), 9) a seamstress who “stitches, mends” (Gen. 3:21) and knits (Ps. 139:13,15), 10) a mistress (Psalm 123:2), 11) a mother (Isaiah 42:14; 66:13) 12) a mid-wife (psalm 22:9-10).

How many are we up to so far? Twelve - a good, holy number. And notice how they’re not only human – and both male and female – they’re also metaphors using Animals, birds, and inanimate objects: rocks, buildings.

In the New Testament some Old Testament metaphors reappear - with a twist that they’re often applied to Jesus also: God as shepherd, as Lord, as King, the foundation, Wisdom . The God we meet in Jesus is the gift, the true vine, the gate, the living bread, the light, the door, the root, the morning star (2 Peter 1:9), the way, the truth, Living water – and the list goes on.

Then there’s God as wind – we just heard that one – and fire - think about Pentecost.

In Christian theology, worship, and hymnody the use of metaphor goes on.

In our own age we seek to use metaphor to help interpret God in ways that bring meaning to our lives. Sometimes we fail – and we know it! – God is our co-pilot, creation’s CEO, The divine Clock Maker, aren’t the most helpful.

But when we’re faced with a crisis in our lives our God-metaphors can be inadequate to the situations we face – God as shepherd may be less helpful than God as a jazz band leader who improvises along the way! Having permission to seek these more meaningful metaphors is a gift because it allows for a continued relationship with God. So seeking meaningful contemporary metaphors for God is something that we should celebrate, rather than denigrate.

“What metaphors?” you might ask – God the Divine Physical Therapist; God the Coach; God the Graffiti Artist; God the Blacksmith; God the Divine Night Light; God as Persistent Life; God the Flamenco Dancer (these are from Rev. Carolyn Jane Bohler).

All of this is to say that while we must be judicious and cautious in the God metaphors we use, we are given the gift by God of embracing metaphors that go beyond the traditional.

That brings us squarely to today. So what about the Trinity? Yes, “Father, Son, Holy Spirit” is a metaphor – something that seeks to convey meaning. It does so imperfectly – “through the window darkly” to use Paul’s metaphor.

It does so imperfectly and it defies explanation – if we could understand and explain the Trinity it would in reality be less than it needs to be as a metaphor for God. In the end, all attempts at

definition are bound to allude us because we do not have the language to grasp the meaning successfully. As Joseph Campbell said, "God is a metaphor for that which transcends all levels of intellectual thought. It's as simple as that." St. Anselm got it wrong – we are incapable of encompassing the very idea of God. Ironically, that, in the end, is good! "Our salvation is not that we know but that we are willing to be known." (Bp. William Willimon). It's not about who God is but about who we are willing to be, and if we spent more time focusing on that, rather than the endless discussions about God, the world – and everyone in it – would be a better place!

So think of this day as mysterious! Think of the Trinity as "a mystery, not a puzzle. Love is a mystery, a crossword is a puzzle. You try to solve the puzzle, you stand in awe before a mystery." (Justo Gonzalez). And so, as we repeat the Creed, let us do so in awe, before this mystery".

Amen.