

### **John 3: 1-17**

**A FOREST RANGER IN A NATIONAL FOREST DESCRIBES THE MOST COMMON QUESTION THAT VISITORS TO HIS PARK ASK THE FORST RANGERS. MANY PEOPLE, HE SAID, COME TO THE PARK TO HIKE ONE OF THE BEAUTIFUL TRAILS THAT WANDER THROUGH THE FOREST, TRAILS DESIGNED TO DISPLAY THE MAGNIFICANT TREES AND PLANTS, TO LET THE HIKERS ENCOUNTER THE ARRAY OF WILDLIFE IN THE FOREST, AND TO TAKE HIKERS ON TO HILLTOPS FOR BREATHTAKING VIEWS OF THE COUNTRYSIDE. BUT THE MOST FREQUENT QUESTION THAT VISITORS ASK THE FOREST RANGERS IS NOT “WHERE DOES THIS TRAIL GO?” OR “HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO HIKE IT?” OR “DO WE NEED BUG SPRAY ON THE TRAIL” BUT INSTEAD “EXCUSE ME, CAN YOU TELL ME WHERE THE TRAIL STARTS?” IT MAKES SENSE. NO MATTER HOW LOVELY OR BREATHTAKING A TRAIL MAY BE, IF YOU DON’T KNOW WHERE THE TRAIL STARTS, YOU CAN’T HIKE IT.**

**TODAY IS TRINITY SUNDAY, A DAY ON THE CHURCH’S CALENDAR WHEN WE LIFT UP THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF THE HOLY TRINITY AND PROCLAIM NOT ONLY THAT GOD IS ONE GOD, GOD ALONE...BUT ALSO THAT GOD IS IN THREE PERSONS: FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT. GRANTED, MANY PEOPLE CONSIDER THE IDEA OF THE TRINITY TO BE RATHER ABSTRACT AND REMOTE, SOMETHING THAT ONLY THEOLOGIANs AND PHILOSOPHERS MIGHT WORRY ABOUT. AFTER ALL, THE TRINITY IS OF LITTLE CONCERN TO US...JUST REGULAR FOLKS TRYING OUT BEST TO LIVE OUR EVERYDAY LIVES.**

**THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY CAN BE COMPARED TO A TRAIL IN A DEEP AND MYSTERIOUS FOREST. IF WE WILL WALK THIS TRAIL CALLED THE TRINITY, WE WILL SEE AND EXPERIENCE AMAZING THINGS; WE WILL DISCOVER SOMETHING OF WHAT GOD IS TRULY LIKE, IN ALL OF GOD’S BEAUTY AND SPENDOR.**

**WE WILL DISCOVER MANY THINGS ABOUT GOD AS WE EXPLORE THE TRINITY. SOME PEOPLE THINK OF GOD AS A GREAT BIG PARENT IN THE SKY, OR MAYBE A FEARSOME JUDGE WHO STARES DOWN AND MAKES US BEHAVE OUT OF FEAR AND GUILT. OTHER PEOPLE THINK OF GOD LIKE A DIVINE CLOCKMAKER WHO MADE THE CREATION, WOUND IT UP, AND LETS IT TICK AWAY ON ITS OWN. OTHER PEOPLE THINK OF GOD AS SOME DISTANT STAR, COLD, UNBLINKING, SHINING OUT THERE SOMEWHERE, BUT FAR AWAY FROM US AND OUR LIVES. BUT WHEN WE EXPLORE THE TRINITY, WE SEE THAT GOD IS A COMMUNITY OF PERSONS...FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT IN A LIVING AND DYNAMIC COMMUNION OF LOVE AND SELF-GIVING.**

**OK, SO GOD IS A COMMUNITY OF THREE..FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT, BUT WHERE DOES IT START? THAT IS REALLY WHAT NICODEMUS IN OUR GOSPEL LESSON IS ASKING. NICODEMUS IS A RELIGIOUS LEADER; BUT THERE IS SOMETIMES A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BEING RELIGIOUS AND ACTUALLY KNOWING GOD. NICODEMUS HAS A VERY PUBLIC**

COMMITMENT TO GOD ON THE OUTSIDE; BUT HE WANTS, AS MANY OF US DO, SOMETHING MORE, SOMETHING DEEPER, A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD ON THE INSIDE. SO NICODEMUS COMES TO JESUS SECRETLY, UNDER THE COVER OF DARKNESS, TO SAY, "YOU COME FROM GOD. EVERYONE CAN SEE THAT. I WANT TO KNOW GOD, TOO; I WANT TO *REALLY* KNOW GOD. I FEEL LIKE I WANT GOD IN MY LIFE. BUT HOW DO I BEGIN?" IN OTHER WORDS: "WHERE DOES THE TRAIL START?"

WHAT JESUS TOLD NICODEMUS WAS SHOCKING...SHOCKING TO NICODEMUS AND MAYBE SHOCKING TO US, TOO. JESUS SAID, "NICODEMUS, YOU DON'T NEED GOD IN YOUR LIFE....YOU DON'T NEED GOD TO COME INTO YOUR LIFE. THAT'S BACKWARDS. YOU NEED TO COME INTO *GOD'S LIFE*. GOD DOESN'T COME INTO YOUR LIFE. IT WORKS THE OTHER WAY. GOD OFFERS US HIS OWN LIFE AS A GIFT AND BECKONS US TO ENTER IT. *YOU* NEED TO BE *IN* THE LIFE OF GOD. IN FACT, NICODEMUS, YOU NEED TO BE BORN ALL OVER AGAIN, THIS TIME BORN INTO GOD'S LIFE."

"I DON'T KNOW HOW TO DO THAT," SAID NICODEMUS. "I DON'T KNOW HOW TO BE BORN ALL OVER AGAIN INTO THE LIFE OF GOD."

AND JESUS SAID, "I KNOW YOU DON'T KNOW. WELL, THERE IS GOOD NEWS FOR YOU, NICODEMUS. THE LIFE OF GOD IS NOT FAR AWAY FROM YOU. THE LIFE OF GOD HAS COME NEAR TO YOU. INDEED, THE LIFE OF GOD IS SITTING RIGHT NEXT TO YOU, SPEAKING TO YOU NOW." THE LOVE THAT BINDS TOGETHER THE FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT, THE PASSIONATE LOVE THAT FLOWS FROM GOD HAS SPILLED OUT IN THE WORLD IN JESUS. GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT GOD HAS GIVEN HIS ONLY SON...GIVEN NOT TO CONDEMN THE WORLD BUT TO SAVE IT.

IN OTHER WORDS, JESUS CHRIST IS WHERE THE TRAIL STARTS, THE TRAIL LEADS US INTO THE JOYFUL AND LOVING LIFE OF GOD. THIS IS WHY WHEN PEOPLE CHOOSE TO FOLLOW JESUS CHRIST AND ARE BAPTIZED AS NEW BELIEVERS, THEY ARE BAPTIZED NOT JUST IN JESUS' NAME BUT IN THE NAME OF THE TRINITY. TO BE BAPTIZED IS NOT JUST A CEREMONY BUT A REBIRTH INTO A NEW WAY OF LIFE, INTO GOD'S OWN LIFE. TO BE A FOLLOWER OF JESUS IS NOT JUST TO ASK, "WHAT WOULD JESUS DO?" BUT TO BE DRAWN INTO A COMMUNION WITH THE FULLNESS OF GOD'S LIFE. WHENEVER I DO PRE-MARITAL COUNSELING, THE COUPLE AND I TALK ABOUT HOW THEY ARE NOT JUST MARRYING ONE ANOTHER BUT THEY ARE MARRYING EACH OTHER'S FAMILY. JUST SO, TO BELONG TO JESUS IS TO BELONG TO HIS WHOLE FAMILY, TO BE DRAWN THROUGH JESUS THE SON INTO A DEEP AND LOVING RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD THE FATHER IN THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

A PASTOR RECALLS BAPTIZING A TWO-YEAR-OLD BOY. AFTER THE CHILD HAD BEEN BAPTIZED WITH WATER, THE PASTOR PUT HIS HAND ON THE LITTLE BOY'S HEAD AND ADDRESSED HIM SAYING, "YOU ARE A CHILD OF GOD, SEALED BY THE SPIRIT IN YOUR BAPTISM, AND YOU

**BELONG TO JESUS CHRIST FOREVER.” UNEXPECTEDLY, THE LITTLE BOY LOOKED UP AND RESPONDED, “UH-OH.”**

**IT WAS AN AMUSING MOMENT AND THE CONGREGATION GOT A CHUCKLE OUT OF IT BUT OF COURSE IT WAS AN APPROPRIATE RESPONSE. IT WAS AN ‘UH OH’ MOMENT AS EVERYTHING HAD JUST CHANGED, THIS LITTLE BOY WOULD NEVER BE THE SAME. HE DID NOT BELONG ANY MORE JUST TO HIS BIOLOGICAL FAMILY; HE HAD NOW BEEN BORN ALL OVER AGAIN, THIS TIME INTO GOD’S TRINITARIAN FAMILY. NOW HE WOULD BE CALLED TO LIVE OUT IN THE WORLD THE KIND OF LOVE AND SELF-GIVING THAT GOES ON AMONG FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT. HE WAS BEING CALLED IN HIS BAPTISM TO LIVE A DIFFERENT WAY IN THE WORLD, GOD’S WAY, A WAY THAT IS SOMETIMES MET WITH REJECTION AND SCORN. NO WONDER HE SAID, ‘UH OH.’ LIFE WOULD BEVER BE THE SAME.**

**EVERY NOW AND THEN WE CATCH A GLIMPSE, EVEN IN WORLD OF PAIN AND VIOLENCE, OF WHAT BEING IN THIS LOVING, SELF-GIVING, THREE-PERSON LIFE OF GOD IS LIKE. ON A COLD JANUARY NIGHT IN 1941, IN AN UNHEATED BARRACK IN A GERMAN DEATH CAMP, SOME OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL MUSIC EVER COMPOSED WAS PLAYED FOR THE FIRST TIME. IT WAS PLAYED ON OLD, WORN INSTRUMENTS BY PRISONERS AT THE CAMP; AND IT HAD BEEN COMPOSED BY ANOTHER PRISONER, A FRENCHMAN AND DEVOUT CHRISTIAN BY THE NAME OF OLIVIER MESSIAEN. HE SAID HE WANTED TO COMPOSE SOME MUSIC THAT WOULD PROCLAIM, EVEN IN THE TERRORS OF THE DEATH CAMP, THAT THE LOVE AND HOPE OF GOD WAS STILL ALIVE. HE WAS TIRED OF THE BEAT OF THE NAZI JACK BOOT: HUP-TWO-THREE-FOUR. AND SO HE COMPOSED HIS MUSIC ACCORDING TO A BEAUTIFUL VERSE IN THE FRENCH TRANSLATION OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION, WHERE AN ANGEL ANNOUNCES; “THERE IS NO MORE TIME,” THAT IS TO SAY, AT THE END OF TIME ALL BROKEN, JAGGED, AND SEEMINGLY HOPELESS HUMAN HISTORY WILL BE GATHERED INTO THER ETERNAL AND LOVING LIFE OF GOD.**

**HE CALLED IT “THE QUARTET FOR THE END OF TIME.” HOW DO YOU COMPOSE MUSIC LIKE THAT, MUSIC WITHOUT TIME? THE METERS, THE RHYTHMS ARE IRREGULAR, CONSTANTLY CHANGING, WHICH MEANS THE MUSICIANS CANNOT PLAY IN SPLENDID ISOLATION, SIMPLY COUNTING OUT THEIR PARTS IN TIME. INSTEAD, THEY HAVE TO PAY ATTENTION TO EACH OTHER, TO ATTEND TO EACH OTHER. THEY HAVE TO PLAY AS AN ENSEMBLE. MORE THAN THAT, THEY HAVE TO PLAY IN COMMUNION WITH EACH OTHER. IN FACT, RIGHT ON THE SCORE WHERE MOST COMPOSERS WOULD HAVE WRITTEN, “PLAY SLOWLY, PLAY MODERATELY, PLAY RAPIDLY,” MESSIAEN WROTE, “PLAY TENDERLY, PLAY WITH LOVE.”**

**AND THAT, FINALLY, IS WHAT THE TRINITY IS ALL ABOUT. TO BELONG TO GOD IS TO BELONG TO THE LIFE OF GOD, TO THE COMMUNITY OF ONE GOD IN THREE PERSONS, AND TO BE CALLED TO LIVE OUR WHOLE LIVES IN THE SAME MANNER THAT FATHER, SON, AND HOLY**

**SPIRIT RELATE TO EACH OTHER....TENDERLY, LOVINGLY. GOD LOVED THE WORLD SO MUCH THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY SON, AND THIS SON, JESUS CHRIST, OPENS HIS ARMS WIDE TO WELCOME US INTO THE VERY LIFE OF GOD. THE TRAIL INTO GOD'S OWN LIFE STARTS HERE.**