

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: March 8, 2020
Sermon Title: "Big Stuff: Incarnation, Trinity,
Born Again"
Scripture: John 1:1, 14; John 3:3, 5, 16
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

John 1:1, 14; John 3:3, 5, 16

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us . . . Verily I say unto you, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again . . . no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the spirit . . . for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Ever since I became a pastor, I've been aware of the various "litmus tests" that many Christians apply to other Christians to decide if they are Christian enough or Christian at all. It gets asked of me, asked of Church members; people call or email to inquire: "Are you a 'born-again' Church?" "Do you baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost?" "Are you saved?" "Do you believe in the Resurrection? The Incarnation? The Virgin birth?" "Do you teach the 'Four Spiritual Laws'?" "Have you been baptized in the Holy Spirit?" "Do you speak in tongues"?

I first got a taste of this competitive theologies business in the late 60s when I was working with my father at his Church in Brooklyn. It was a large, thriving, very active Church. But there was this man who kept coming by, wanting to buy the Church, asking to buy the Church, eventually demanding to buy it. I did some investigation. It turns out he was a pastor in another part of Brooklyn, and he was using pictures of my dad's Church in his fundraising appeals all across the country. He was promising to buy that dead, liberal, unsaved Church and use it to launch salvation for the whole city of New York. Send money, please!

We had that happen to us here a few years ago. A new Church started up at McKinley school. They kicked it off with a video of our Church as emblematic of

dead Churches in Fairfield; and then they gave out literature door-to-door, featuring our Church, and showed pictures of our actual members, as representative of the decadent unsaved rich people of Fairfield. In both situations these would-be saviors of this Church and my dad's Church didn't bother to know either Church or its people or pastors or what we believe.

That got me thinking about our own core historical beliefs. We've had lively discussions at Bible Study about them, so I decided to tackle them here for you: the Incarnation, the Trinity, and being "born-again," theological buzzwords that have been bouncing around Christianity for 2,000 years, tripping up preachers, puzzling people, defying easy definition. People fought over them, people were killed over them, Churches split over them. And I'm going to explain them all in 15 minutes!

Incarnation, from the Latin, means God takes on human form, God becomes one of us, God has "flesh in the game." *Incarnation*.

Trinity means three; three of anything is a trinity. I once ate a sandwich at a deli called "The Trinity": ham, salami, turkey, a three-in-one sandwich. *The Trinity*. But in Christian religion, Trinity means God's being known in three very different ways. Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, while miraculously remaining one. *Monotheism*. That's having your cake and eating it too. We are monotheists—one God—while speaking of God in three ways. The *Trinity*. Got it?

Being "born again," is a phrase that was pretty straightforward when Jesus said it, but has gotten complicated in modern usage. Maybe this is the place to begin because, according to Jesus, being "born again" clears everything up. What happened is this really bright, educated, respected religious scholar, Nicodemus, came to visit Jesus one evening. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, the religious cream of the crop. His whole life was devoted to knowing God, serving God, teaching God. Part of his job was to protect the Jewish people from religious frauds and charlatans. So it makes sense that he would want to meet Jesus, check him out, ask some probing questions, enter into dialogue.

Nicodemus begins by complimenting Jesus. Jesus responds to him by saying, "No one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again." In other words, Nicodemus, your questions, your doubts won't get cleared up unless you are reborn a new way and see things with fresh eyes.

Nowadays, the Kingdom of God is used for heaven. Or people think it's what the earth will be after Jesus returns and fixes things. But Jesus was referring to right then, and for our benefit, right now. In Jesus's usage, the Kingdom of God is a state of mind, a way of being, an approach to life; it's our worldview. The Kingdom of God is how things are when God is at the heart of it all, central,

intrinsic. It can be the future, but it doesn't have to be. It can be heaven, but you don't have to wait till you die.

Jesus actually said, "The Kingdom of God is at hand." (Matthew 4:17) "The Kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:21) It's not "pie-in-the-sky by-and-by." It's God's reality, God's perspective, alive and well wherever we choose to live it.

Years ago, I read a little story in *The New Yorker* about the "Waldo Park Brass Players," a group of brass instrument folks who showed up on Sundays in Central Park to play their trumpets and trombones to their hearts' delight. After enjoying their music for a while, the writer asked, "Where's Waldo Park?" One of the players chuckled. "Waldo Park is wherever we're playing." Wherever they got to play their brass-inspired music was their Waldo Park. Wherever we get to live our God-inspired life is the Kingdom of God.

But how do we get to Waldo Park, our earthly, local Kingdom of God? The key to that is to be born again. Being born again means to make a priority of how God sees things. When that happens, then figuring things out, like the Trinity, understanding the Incarnation, entering the Kingdom of God—all that stuff makes sense viewed through the prism of God. All that stuff is gobbledygook viewed through the prism of our own wisdom.

Being born again is what wakes us up. A light goes on. Your perspective changes. This happens to us all the time. We call it an "aha" moment. Something has puzzled us, eluded us, confounded us. Think back over your school days, your business career, your athletic pursuits, your family life, even your health; or being a parent, or owning a dog, or your golf game. You tried and tried; people explained and explained; you watched YouTube videos; and then, suddenly, "aha!" You've got it, clear as day!

Aside from my conversion, I had another major "aha" moment. I started ministry as a Baptist, so how you were baptized, and when, was a big deal. I started in the Civil Rights era, the Vietnam War era, so social justice was very important. I was well trained at top seminaries, so theology and doctrine were essential.

I did all that stuff the right way. But my "born again" moment was when I looked at the whole Bible, in its entirety, the whole Christian story, from Christmas to Easter, and I saw that the truest underpinning of it all is love: God's love, and our love for all God brought into being.

Sometimes it's as simple as not fighting it anymore. Open yourself up. I got an F in biology at Colgate University. Six months later, I got an A- in biology at Hofstra. At Colgate I fought it, fretted over it, gave up on it. It was beyond me. At

Hofstra I had a new mindset. Instead of fighting it, I let it flow over me. I remember the day when all those slides under a microscope made sense to me. I could see patterns; all the clues were right there.

A lot of people do the same with God. We make God complicated; we make Church, religion, faith complicated. Lots of finger-wagging doctrines and liturgies to master. When all God wants is to be let in.

One summer I sent my son to baseball camp run by a former Boston Red Sox star. My son and the Red Sox star were both second basemen, so my son got a lot of attention. To my amazement, the first thing they did was take away my son's baseball glove and put a ping-pong paddle in his hand! Then they started hitting ground balls at him—hard.

How do you catch a hard-hit ground ball with a ping-pong paddle? Soft hands. Give up the rigidity. Don't try to dominate the ball. Let the ball come to you. Bring it in gently, cradle it, don't fight it.

That's the promise of being "born again." Jesus said, "The Spirit blows where it will." Let God's Spirit blow over you. Bend with it. Move with it. Enter the dynamic of it. Enjoy it. God's not trying to ruin your day. Just shape it. And with that, the world opens up, things get clearer.

As often happens, pop songs get to the nitty-gritty quicker. You may remember the song:

*I can see clearly now the rain is gone.
I can see all obstacles in my way.
Gone are the dark clouds that had me blind,
It's gonna be a bright, bright sunshinin' day.
It's gonna be a bright, bright sunshinin' day.*

*I think I can make it now, the pain is gone.
All of the bad feelings have disappeared.
Here is that rainbow I've been praying for.
It's gonna be a bright, bright sunshinin' day. (Johnny Nash)*

That's being "born again." Yes, the world is troubled. Life is complicated. Society is in disarray. Challenges are all around. We worry about our kids. We're afraid of death. We have more questions than answers, more doubts than faith, more anger than love, more anxiety than patience. You can feel as though everything is collapsing in on you.

Being born again is accepting God's invitation to enter into God's world and share in God's grand design. See the big picture. Imagine eternity. Welcome God's embrace.

"Let go and let God" isn't just a cliché; it's a strategy. Jesus's point is once you start thinking that way, you enter the Kingdom of God, and God's world becomes ours. And it makes sense. Even strange doctrines can make sense. Take the Incarnation. From a strictly human perspective, God's partnering with Mary, creating a sort of human/sort of divine baby, to save the world, that's a stretch. From the Kingdom of God perspective, God's desire to know humanity so intimately, to enter fully into our existence, to be immersed in us, and start by taking the form of truest innocence, a baby, that's a beautiful thing.

Humans focus on the biology of the thing. God and Mary: how did they do that? So we focus on the Virgin Birth. Believe it, you're a Christian. Don't believe it, you're a heretic. The Kingdom of God focus is on the essence of the thing. Love. Love makes perfect sense.

Same with the Trinity. We take three things, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, three distinct things, three things, often even called the "three persons" of the Trinity, 3, 3, 3.

And then we tell the world it's one: $1+1+1=1$. Three in one. From a strictly human perspective, $1+1+1=1$ doesn't add up, and to say it does costs us credibility. But from the Kingdom of God perspective, God wants to be known, God wants us to relate, so God comes at us in new ways, multiple ways. That's ingenuity, not contradiction.

My father was my father, my coach, my teacher, my pastor, and my boss at various points in my life. Same man, very different personas, very different ways of interacting with me. But within my father, as within God, there was an organizing principle that held it all together. Justice. Fair play. Maximum effort. Great expectations. Unconditional love. All of that in one man in various roles.

That's the Trinity. God is at work determined to get the best out of you, to get the best for you, to get the best relationship with you. And God comes at you this way, that way, and another way. *Trinity*.

Well, what's this got to do with the coronavirus? You did not come to Church today determined to understand the Trinity, the Kingdom of God, the Incarnation, and being "born again." Our world is topsy-turvy. The stock market has lost 3,500 points. College kids are being withdrawn from semesters abroad. Schools are closing. Sporting events are being held in empty stadiums. People are being told not to go to Church. Spring break. March Madness. Opening Day for baseball. All

are at risk of drastic measures. Cruise ships are floating prisons. Italy is closed. Alida and I just lost our post-Easter trip to Florence and Rome. Truth is, the best minds aren't sure if this is panic driven or panic worthy.

I'm the wrong person to ask about any of this. When I go to the doctor, the first thing I tell them is, "Don't tell me anything. I don't want to know."

I am, however, a ubiquitous pastor. I am everywhere, and this week that has led to fascinating conversations. I've taught four classes, led two services at senior citizen residences. I've visited 14 people in hospitals and nursing homes, and I dropped in at our high school youth group. To my amazement, there was a common theme at all of those places coming from all those people: faith, confidence in God, trust in medical science.

It was expressed in many ways, with a singular focus, like the Trinity. It incarnated the love of God into this very specific time of crisis. People were determined to view this world through the prism of God at work, as if, born again, they could see the Kingdom of God in this hour.

Everywhere I went, I asked people what they thought, how they were doing, what we should be doing. To varying degrees, with a variety of words, the universal response was, "Hey, you're in the prayer business. God is at work. Let's be smart. Listen to the experts. And call upon God to protect us."

I was impressed. It was like "Prayer and Purell." In wartime, soldiers have had a similar thing, "Praise the Lord, and pass the ammunition." Or, in Oliver Cromwell's time, "Praise the Lord, and keep your powder dry."

God gives us science. God gives us medicine. God gives us common sense. God is with us. That's the born-again view of things.

I don't know if you noticed, our opening hymn today, "Holy, Holy, Holy," is a "Trinity" hymn: "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, God in three persons, Blessed Trinity." We're going to close with an "Incarnation" hymn, stepping back to the Christmas season, a beautiful hymn, "When God is a Child," No. 132.

*Hope is a star that shines in the night,
leading us on till the morning is bright.*

*When God is a child
there's joy in our song.
The last shall be first
and the weak shall be strong,
and none shall be afraid.*

*Peace is a ribbon that circles the earth,
giving a promise of safety and worth.*

*When God is a child
there's joy in our song.
The last shall be first
and the weak shall be strong,
and none shall be afraid.*

*Joy is a song that welcomes the dawn,
telling the world that the Savior is born.*

*When God is a child
there's joy in our song.
The last shall be first
and the weak shall be strong,
and none shall be afraid.*

*Love is a flame that burns in our heart.
Jesus has come and will never depart.*

*When God is a child
there's joy in our song.
The last shall be first
and the weak shall be strong,
and none shall be afraid.*