



August 28, 2016  
Pastor Larry Hackman  
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

## *Fearless Q: Who Is God?*

John 1:1

[The interview with kids' video ends with one of the girls saying, "I don't know who God is, I haven't met him yet.]

I love the honesty of the answers we get from children. Why would she have something to say about God if she's never seen him, right? Makes total sense. But we're curious though, aren't we? We want to know what God looks like, who he's like. If there's this being out there who is all-powerful, running the show, don't you want to know what he's like? Maybe what he looks like?

So it's natural that some of the questions we got centered around this theme. A lot of these questions came from our kids.

- What does God look like? Are God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit actually one "God" or three separate beings?
- How is Jesus the same person as God if God is older?
- Did Jesus become God?
- How can God be three in one? Did He vacate Heaven to come to Earth as a baby?

Essentially, we are asking the question, who is God? You may not realize it, but this is more challenging of a question that it seems at first blush. If God made our universe than he's got to be bigger and more powerful than the universe. He's outside of our universe. He's bigger than space and time itself, because space and time come from him. Trying to figure out God is like trying to trying to count to infinity. Try it sometime, you can't do it!

So there's only one way you can know God. And that's if he reveals himself. Since we can't figure God out on our own because he's so big, he has to tell us what he's like. It's kind of like figuring out what our planet looks like while we're standing on it. [Picture of first space picture] This is the first picture anybody ever took of the earth from space, from 1946. When scientists took it they were ecstatic. Nobody knew what the earth looked like from space! Then Apollo 17 took this picture from space in 1972. [Picture of Blue Marble earth] It's probably one of the most well-known photographs ever taken, seriously. It's why some people call our planet the Blue Marble. Now we take it for granted that this is what the earth looks like from space. But before these pictures, nobody ever knew what earth looked like, because we were stuck down here on the face of it.

It's kind of like that with God. We need a satellite picture of God to know what he's like. What is our satellite picture of God going to be? Where will we find out how God has revealed himself to be? Yes, and the Bible tells us about who? Yes! To know about God, we begin with Jesus. Jesus begins to give us the 30,000-foot view of who God is.

Let's turn to John 1:1

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.... <sup>14</sup>And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.... <sup>18</sup>No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.*

This is the Word of the Lord, [Thanks be to God]

If you want to understand who God is, you begin with Jesus. Even Jesus himself says this later in the Gospel of John, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." The actions, life, and words of Jesus make known to us this God who is before all of time and space. The big God made flesh. Let's take a moment to soak this in. The God who we couldn't wrap our brains around made himself a human being so we could understand him. Whoa! If you think God is mysterious, if you've wondered what he'd be like to meet, what he's like to talk to, you don't have to wonder any more. That's what Jesus accomplished, that's what John's talking about here. The Word became flesh. No one has seen God, but the Word, who is at the Father's side, he has made God known. Wow! I love that in the video we just saw the kids talk about God as if he's a giant version of Jesus, because it's not too far off from what John is saying here. Jesus is the God who's hand we can shake, and who can give us a hug.

Jesus shows us the Father, but does that make him lower than the Father? No, not at all. Remember, John 1 says that the Word, Jesus, was God. He was with God in the beginning. Both the Father and the Son are God. The Gospels and the New Testament are clear about ascribing to Jesus, the Son, the same attributes of God as the Father. When the Father creates, so does the Son. The Father is called God, so is the Son. The Father is eternal, so is the Son. And there are many more.

	The Father	The Son
Creates	Isaiah 64:8	Colossians 1:15-17
Called God	Philippians 1:2	Colossians 2:9
Eternal	Psalm 90:2	Micah 5:1-2

But Scripture also reveals to us the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the “shy member of the Trinity.” He tends to be in the background a lot, not up front and center like the Son. But nonetheless, he is God too.

	The Father	The Son	The Spirit
Creates	Isaiah 64:8	Colossians 1:15-17	Job 33:4
Called God	Philippians 1:2	Colossians 2:9	Acts 5:3-4
Eternal	Psalms 90:2	Micah 5:1-2	Hebrews 9:14

Scripture tells us that he is not a force, but he is a person with feelings, who talks and acts. And he has some of the same attributes that the Father and the Son do too. He creates, he is called God, he is eternal.

So Scripture lays out before us these three people, all of them who claim divinity. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And sometimes they all show up at once in the Story. In Mark 1:9-11, there’s an account of Jesus’ baptism. Listen closely and see if you can spot all three of these persons in the story.

*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”*

Did you see them? So the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit aren’t three different versions of God, appearing at different times. They’re all three different people, and here they are all at once.

But if you know your Scriptures well this poses a concern for you. In Deuteronomy 6:4, it says, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” So we are certainly clear that there are not three Gods, but only one God. This is very important too. The early Christians were Jews, and they were really set on this point. There is only one God, not many gods, not even just three gods, only one God. So we are always still talking about one God, otherwise we would have been like the Romans who had a pantheon of gods.

Let me lay out all the bits of evidence that Scripture gives about who God is for us.

1. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all God. Fully God, not created by one or another, but equal in their God-ness
2. Each of them are unique persons. They aren’t God appearing at different times differently, but actual individual persons.
3. There is only one God. Not three Gods.

Put all these pieces of evidence together, and you have what we call the doctrine of the Trinity. To put it simply: we worship one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Think of the word trinity meaning a tri-unity, and though it’s nowhere in

Scripture, it's the word that we use to describe what Scripture is saying to us, as we just laid out. Trinity is a description of what Scripture tells us.

But how do you wrap your brain around God as three in one? People have tried to illustrate this, but even our illustrations fail to really help here. Some have said that the Trinity is like the three states of water: liquid, ice, and steam. But the problem is that water can't be liquid, ice, and steam all at once—like God is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all at once, like we saw at Jesus' baptism. So that doesn't work. Or a three leaf clover, the three petals are like the Trinity, right? But in the Trinity each person is unique, not like leaves on a plant. God doesn't have three parts, Jesus is not one-third of God, he's one person. We don't say that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were all on the cross, only Jesus was. A three-leaf clover doesn't help us understand that. Using the yolk, white, and shell of an egg has the same problem. God isn't made of three parts, he's three people! The problem with these illustrations is that they try and explain God like a math problem:  $1+1+1=3$ . But what Scripture tells us about God is that  $1+1+1=1$ !

Illustrations and metaphors don't help us understand the Trinity because God is outside and above nature. You can't begin with nature and explain God, remember? He's bigger than our whole universe! An egg won't explain that. We aren't going to figure him out on our terms. We can only understand him as he has revealed himself on his terms: three persons, one God. We try and take away the mystery of that with illustrations. But you know what, let it be mysterious! Doesn't it make sense that if God is really real, it would be impossible to wrap our minds around him? We wouldn't have made this up as human beings. To me, the paradoxical nature of the Trinity is its own argument for truth. God really is mysterious and other, and he's revealed himself that way.

Maybe it doesn't work to try and use nature to illustrate who God is, but we can use some illustrations to talk about God. And there's one metaphor that I particularly like that describes how the members of the Trinity relate to one another. Long ago, when Christians were wrestling with how to talk about the Trinity, they came up with the word, "perichoresis." Peri wha? Perichoresis. It's a word that means, essentially, "to make room around." But the image that the word conjures is that of dancing. [Dancing video] The early church used the metaphor of a dance to describe the way that the Father, Son, and Spirit relate. In a dance, the two individuals make room for one another, they coordinate, they move as one, but they are still individuals. There is a constant give and take, they make room for one another. That is how the Trinity works together, and it gets at why understanding why God as a Trinity, as this community of persons in perfect, equal, unity, really matters for our faith.

But before I explain why it matters for our faith, let me ask a question. Before there were humans or angels, was God ever lonely? Think about that. God created angels and humans, and there was a time before both existed, before anything existed. But was God lonely? No, because God is a Trinity. Before time, before anything

existed, God was this dancing unity between three persons. And each of the three persons loved the other. So when 1 John 4:8 says "God is love," it's not because of his relationship to human beings. It's actually because God is, in his very own being, love, even before anything existed. God is a community of persons, loving one another. And the love that he has within the Trinity overflows for us. When we experience the love of God, we are entering into the love that the Trinity has had for one another since before all of time.

This is the problem that other religions have to explain about God. If God was alone before creation, how could he be love? How can one person, alone, love? Let's use our imagination for a moment. [Three volunteers from the congregation] Imagine \_\_\_\_\_ is God. I know, that's hard to do. And imagine that a hug is love. \_\_\_\_\_ is up here on the chancel, and they want to hug. But they're all alone. I guess they could decide to hug themselves, like a narcissist. But if they're already happy hugging themselves, why would they hug another? But let's bring someone else into the picture. Let's say that so and so has always had someone to hug. In fact, they've got two others to hug. Group hug! It's easy to share a group hug. If God were alone, he would never have created. He would not have overflowed with love. Any love that he had would have been narcissistic. He would never have said, "Let us make man in our image." And what is that image? We are people who desperately need love. We need community. We need others, from the moment we are born.

So you see, the Trinity is not an oddity, some sort of mathematical problem. It actually truly helps us to understand who God is, that he is love. If God is love, if he is a Trinity, then of course he would create us. Not because he needs us, but because he wanted to share his love. If God is a Trinity, if he is love, of course he would be humble. Each person of the Trinity had been serving the other since before time. The Spirit glorifies the Son, the Son glorifies the Father, the Father glorifies the Son, in this eternal dance, never becoming unbalanced or out of order. So when the Son comes, we see humility in the flesh. If God is a Trinity, then of course he is peace, because only when there is more than one person is there the opportunity for peace. Unity and equality and diversity together make peace. If God is a Trinity, then he is a harmony. And like the harmonies from colors that are different, or from notes in a song, God's harmony is the source of all beauty. I can go on and on. But the point is that all of the goodness that we experience from God comes from his very being, who he is as a Trinity.

I've tried to show you were in Scripture God reveals himself as a trinity, but do you want to know the most important, clearest place in Scripture we hear about the Trinity? And from Jesus himself, listen to his great commission:

*And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,*

*teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Matt. 28:18-20*

Did you hear it? The name, singular, not names, of the Father, **and** of the Son, **and** of the Holy Spirit. In other words, we baptize in the name of the Trinity. To do something “in the name” of something is to do it with all the character of the one who’s name you do it. Later today, if you come to the baptisms in the harbor, you’ll hear us baptize in this name. And when you do, I hope you see that as an illustration of the cleansing that we receive that allows us to participate in the life of the Trinity. That’s what baptism illustrates for us. God is cleansing us, so that we can be a part of his family. The family of the Trinity is being enlarged, and because of the love of God we are welcome to experience the love of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as sons and daughters.

Who is God? God is a trinity. God is love.