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HISTORICAL SERIES, 17

God Seeks and Creates Community

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The Rev. Stephen P. Kristenson was the second Bishop of the Synod of Alberta and the Territories of the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada. He served in that ministry from 1994 to 2006 and then accepted the call to St. John's in Mahone Bay, Nova Scotia. This sermon, according to his custom, was prepared for and made available to the congregations of the Synod to be presented there on the festival of The Holy Trinity, 6 June 2004, the Sunday on which the Synod Convention met for its closing worship service.

Texts: Proverbs 8:1-4; Psalm 8; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

Dear Friends: Grace and peace to you from our Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

As your brothers and sisters gather for the closing worship this morning at the Synod Convention in Medicine Hat [Alberta], it is my privilege to share this word with you as you worship in your congregations back home. Speaking to this many members of our Synod at the same time calls to my mind an image of the kind of unity for which, in John's Gospel, Jesus prayed for his disciples.

This Sunday we reflect upon the nature of God, who is revealed in Scripture in three persons. The concept of the Holy Trinity is a major stumbling block to the other monotheistic religions which are related to us through Abraham. Both the Jewish religion and Islam affirm that there is one God. When they hear us talking about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit it sounds as though we are speaking of three Gods. We Christians do not believe in three Gods. We, also, affirm that there is one God, who is revealed in three persons. We are not likely to win over converts from these other faiths by attempting to prove that our understanding of God is correct. We simply celebrate the incredible gift that God gives us through God's Word which describes how God is revealed in these wonderful ways.

So today's readings give us ample reason for praise.

Proverbs sings the praise of Wisdom, one of the ways in which God is expressed. Wisdom is given a feminine voice, so that all of humanity can relate in an intimate way with the God who created all things. Many of the Bible's images of God are male, so this passage helps us to understand that all of us humans are created in God's image, male and female.

Psalm 8 is a wonderful hymn to God the Creator. When I was a child, I liked to lie in the grass at night and look at the stars and try to imagine how many there were and how far away they might be. Then I would try to imagine what was beyond the farthest star, and I would begin to get a headache. Our finite human brains are simply incapable to imagining the infinite. Yet beyond everything, God still is.

We have learned a lot about our universe through the Hubble telescope that circles the earth outside of the atmosphere which clouds earth-bound telescopes. We hear profound physicists like Stephen Hawking try to explain the universe and infinity, but I suspect when it comes right down to it even Stephen Hawking doesn't really understand how it all works. Even though we know a lot more about the heavens than the Psalmist could dream about, we also are reduced to praise when we consider what God has done. Then when we think with the Psalmist about the fact that God who made the universe and all that is beyond it actually made and cares about us, mere specks of dust on a tiny planet circling a medium-sized star with a few other planets in the midst of one of uncountable numbers of galaxies, the thought makes us as giddy and amazed as the writer of Psalm 8. It is beyond all comprehension, so all we can do is praise God.

The apostle Paul's letter to the Romans also reflects on the awe and majesty of God, who is revealed in the person of Jesus. That the God who created the universe should come into the midst of the people God created in the flesh of one of those human beings, stretches the mind beyond what it can handle. Accepting this miracle requires faith, since it is beyond the ability of any human being to understand fully. Not only did God come in the flesh in Jesus, God gave God's self completely for humankind as Jesus gave up his life on the cross.

When that reality sinks in, we see the world and our place in it with new eyes. Faith in Jesus justifies us, and we experience the

peace that can come only through Jesus. In the fifth chapter of Romans Paul describes what happens to people who are in Christ. We boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

There are many things in our world that rob us of hope. The ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and Iraq, violence in many parts of the world, and domestic violence in our homes and communities remind us that evil is very much present in our society. Our sisters and brothers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Columbia — our companion Synod — continue to share the Good News of God's love in Jesus Christ in the midst of an ongoing civil war which has displaced three million people from their homes over the past fifty years. In spite of all these examples of despair, the Holy Spirit is still active in Christians around the world.

In the Gospel of John Jesus speaks words of hope and encouragement to his disciples in the midst of circumstances that are anything but hopeful. His disciples had a hard time understanding what he was talking about, because they could simply not imagine how God could work in the face of powerful forces such as the Roman Empire. No one could defeat its legions. No one could stand up to its might. Many had tried and failed. Once in a while the disciples would get the impression that Jesus might actually overthrow the Roman government, and they would dream of sitting with Jesus in the halls of power as they ruled the world.

But it became clear that Jesus would not do this. In our Gospel reading Jesus states very directly that the disciples simply cannot understand what he is talking about. They are too focused on what they know of their world to imagine anything different. So Jesus reminds them time after time that the Holy Spirit will be given at the appropriate time, and the Spirit will help them to understand all he was saying and doing.

Last Sunday we celebrated Pentecost, when all of the things Jesus taught finally came together in the disciples' mind as the Spirit blew through them with wind and fire. Frightened and weak men and women were sent out into a hostile world with power that nothing, not even death, could withstand. The wind of the Holy Spirit still

blows through those baptized into Christ in every part of the world. And now it is our turn.

As we look at the world around us, what does it mean to us that we are called by God who has been revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? As the Bible reveals God to us in this way we are given a glimpse of the community that exists within God. God refuses to remain isolated and solitary, and seeks community within God's self and creates community in the humans God brings into being.

Once in a while we would like to have God all to ourselves! Some of us think that our race or culture is particularly blessed to the exclusion of others. Religious wars have been fought when this thinking blinds us to the fact that God has created everyone, and wants all to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. It took the early disciples a long time to realize that Jesus died for everyone, and wanted them to share this good news with the whole world. Two thousand years later we still often struggle with who is in and who is out. It is far easier to remain isolated within groups we know than to reach out to others. As we are baptized into the Triune God, we are also called to share the gospel with everyone.

The Triune God does not remain aloof in a cozy community off in some hidden place. God got dirty and became involved with matter. God made flesh and blood, and trees and lakes and animals and birds. Like a gardener, God seemed to enjoy digging in the dirt and making things purely for the fun of it. The diversity of creation is truly astounding — from the tiniest particle on the atomic scale to the largest star in the universe, God's imagination appears to have no limit. Just the incredible number of insects or flowers or trees or fish or anything else in creation indicates just how interested God is in variety. We discover beautiful flowers in the most desolate reaches on mountain crags that no one ever sees. When we contemplate the abundant life God has made, we are reminded that we are called to care for this incredible world.

Thus when we experience the devastation that human beings can inflict upon one another through war or slavery or economic systems that prevent people from living full, healthy lives, we are also reminded that our loving God calls us to be the presence of the risen Christ to everyone who is hurting. Jesus told his disciples that loving others as he has loved them would be a sign that they are his disciples. He reminded them that as he was one with the Father, so they were one

with him. Doing the work that he did was doing the work of God, and demonstrated the unity that God desires all to experience.

When we respond to God's love to us in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, we demonstrate and experience the unity for which Christ prayed. When we love others as Christ loved us, we show the world what God had in mind when God became flesh in Jesus. Our unity in Christ sets us free to cross over barriers of race, culture, economics, politics, or geography to be Christ's presence in a world of hopelessness and despair. We are free to bring healing to a wounded world. We are free to give our lives for the sake of the other as Jesus gave his life for us. We are free to move about this world that God created, caring for it as the stewards God intends us to be. As God is One, revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so God makes us one in Christ, gathering us from every tribe and nation on earth.

As we live out this unity, serving God by serving others, the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.