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Fourteen and a half billion years ago, into the hush of nothingness, God breathed, and from God's Spirit the universe flashed into existence. Particles flew off in all directions in a cosmic dance, colliding and transforming, forming stars, nebula, spinning galaxies, and eventually us. And God saw that all of this was good.

The love of God and the light and energy of that explosion, the Big Bang, continues to fuel us to this day. We are made of love and energy, and as science tells us, energy cannot be destroyed. It can only be transformed. So too for us.

It's amazing that in the very first line of scripture we are presented with the Trinity. We read of God as Creator, and God as Spirit. As Pastor Kim mentioned last week, the Hebrew word for Spirit is *Ruah*, which also means breath. And we also hear of God as Christ – the light of the world. Love does not exist for itself. God does not sit in a dark silent universe all alone. God is creative, relational and loving, ultimately endowing humanity, created in God's image, with the power to be creative ourselves, to be relational, and especially and above all to be loving.

By Trinity we mean that God is one, but also God is three persons or *hypostases* (try that as a Scrabble word!), traditionally named as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Other names for the persons of the Trinity have come up over the centuries as well – for instance God as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. These different ways of thinking about God are important — partly because they demonstrate the infinite and inclusive nature of God, and partly because we as humans may be relate more to one representation of God than another.

COLUMBUS BOYS' CAMP - I learned this first as a summer camp chaplain some 25 years or so ago. I was working at a camp in Orillia on the shores of lake Simcoe, that was for underprivileged boys from Toronto. They were all city boys and 80% of them came from homes headed by single moms, so they had complex relationships with their fathers. While the idea of God the *Father* could be comforting for some, it could be alienating for others.

On the other hand, the idea of Jesus as *brother* or *Wonderful Counsellor* was highly meaningful to them. And so was the experience of the Holy Spirit. We would begin each ten-day camp session with a huge bonfire on the first night. The campers would gather around with their counsellors and take their seats on the grass. Then we would begin with a spark in the darkness and light up this huge towering mountain of fallen wood, and as the fire grew, and then began to fade. we would have music. Finally. as the fire burned down to embers, we would begin to pray, and as we prayed the children would look up into this brilliant sky, the likes of which you cannot see in a city, and you could feel their experience of awe. We would speak of Jesus the light of the World and of the loving presence of the Holy Spirit as the sounds of the woods surrounded us. There would be a sense of peace and of God's vast yet loving presence. It was a

powerful message for the children that they were loved and safe, and that there was goodness in God's world. Every year we would have older men return to the camp, former campers who would tell us what a difference these experiences made to them. Perhaps these things are only possible because our God is Trinitarian, and willing to approach us in many different ways.

These experiences would not have been so powerful if they had not happened in community. Loving relationships magnify the love of our triune God, who models for us perfect relationship between the three persons of the Trinity.

TRINITY AS DANCE - This relationship is so profound that the Trinity has been described since the early days of the Church as being a divine dance, where each of the three persons of God are engaged in constant giving and receiving, moving and making space, and constantly living a joyful, loving relationship of self-giving. It's a relationship that even makes space for you and me! In fact we are constantly invited to join in, because God is not just a dancer — *God is the dance itself!* So we will no longer dance in the same old way, will we?

You see, God doesn't just embrace and celebrate all difference and diversity, *God engenders both difference and unity within God's very self.* Why else would God want our evolving, diverse, beautiful universe to exist?

All of this difference and diversity within God is there right from the beginning, in the presence of the Trinity. Sometimes people ask, 'But what about the time before Jesus was born? How could there have been a Trinity then?' and that's why in the Gospel reading this morning the author John is at great pains to point out right from the start that *Jesus was always part of God.* Very quickly, in the first three sentences of his Gospel, John names Jesus as both the Word and the Light.

This is so important because 'Word' signifies both truth in what is said and relationship in its very saying. We speak words to others. *The Word* is meant to be shared. Similarly, light is what we are born from, what we are drawn to, and what we innately desire to share, as a reaching for God and for our neighbour. For indeed, "*The light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it*".

Here's the thing — the Trinity gives us different ways of talking about our infinite God, but every single way of understanding God comes back to love and the transformational questions of how to love bigger. It's about spreading our light outward.

I mentioned the twentieth century Jewish philosopher and Talmudic scholar Emmanuel Levinas last time. He's the one who said '*Here I Am*' said to my neighbour is more important and meaningful than '*I believe in God*' because the latter sometimes comes down to only words. Let me tell you his story briefly.

Levinas was born in Kaunas, Lithuania in 1906, on the cusp of East and West, which means he was impacted by both WWI and the Russian Revolution. Despite the upheaval Emmanuel was an excellent student and when he was old enough his

parents, who were booksellers, sent him off to study philosophy at a university in France. Emmanuel thrived there. He was particularly interested in questions of ethical philosophy and he became captivated by the teachings of a German philosopher by the name of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger's philosophy was based on the notion that we are all the same, that we have a common humanity, something he called totality. Levinas found it captivating.

But then the Nazis took power. In what Levinas can only have felt was a great betrayal, Heidegger, who was the rector of his university, joined the Nazi party. Levinas was back home in France though, and he had bigger worries. War was about to break out, and as he was now a French National, Levinas joined the army. But he was quickly captured in the early days of the war in France and he would spend the rest of the war, almost all of it, in a prisoner of war camp. Life was difficult in the POW camp, but these were not extermination camps so thankfully he survived. During that time, to distract himself, he jotted notes and spent a lot of time thinking about the problem with Heidegger's philosophy that obviously wasn't strong enough to guide him to do the right thing. When the war was over Levinas was released, only to find that his entire family and most of his community in Lithuania had been killed. On the other hand, his wife and daughter had survived. You see, Levinas' best friend, a Christian by the name of Maurice Blanchot, had taken them to a Catholic convent where the nuns had hidden them for the duration of the war.

So Levinas was left with the question of *why*? Why would the philosopher Heidegger who was also a Christian, turn Nazi, but his friend Blanchot and the nuns take this great risk for his family? And it came down to this. He said that instead of primarily focusing on the ways we are the same, as Heidegger did, *we need to prize each person's uniqueness, the ways we are different*. Because if we only say everyone is the same, we may eventually encounter someone who seems so different that to our mind they cannot be human. Then what might we be capable of doing to them? We saw this in WWII and we have seen this in every genocide since, including today in Gaza.

This leaves me wondering if the reason Blanchot and the nuns were able to understand this, that difference does not lessen a person's humanity, could it be because they were contemplating the Trinity? The Trinity perfectly exemplifies the importance of both seeing the oneness of God and, in parallel, the way we as humans share a common humanity, but also the diversity of God in three persons and the way we must value difference in our human family.

Levinas also said that when we are looking for God, we need only look at the face of the Other. There we will find a unique reflection of God, a trace, like the reflection of light from a pond. He would say our relationship to God lives in the ethical relationship between one human being and another. And I would extend that to say it lives in our ethical relationship with the planet.

The amazing thing about that is this: if each of us carries the reflection of a unique trace of God, then if we want to understand anything about God *it takes all of us*. If my

relationship to God exists at least partly within my relationship to others, then I need you, and you, and you, and you — all of you — because without you I cannot fully approach God. We need ultimately love for all.

Ruth Page, a theologian I admire, puts it this way, “If love is the fundamental character of God, it is relevant to ask, ‘What does love do?’ and to respond that it does not manage the other; it does not use the other for achieving its own aim, but [...] it establishes and maintains relationship with the other or others. [...] Thus the question ‘What does God do?’ resolves itself into “What is it to have a relationship in a manner worthy of a God of freedom and love?” (Ruth Page, *God and the Web of Creation*, SCM Press: 1996, p.54)

Easy-peasy, right? Well no. We can get caught up in that temptation for power, and we can get tied up in fear. Human beings sometimes confuse *the power of love* with *the love of power*. God does have power — the universe could hardly have been created without it — but God is not about power. Our Trinitarian God is about love.

But we can forget that. Sometimes, and we see this sometimes in high schools or workplaces, we remember to love the people in our group but not those outside of it. It happens to countries too. And churches.

At the extreme end of that we see in prehistoric times human sacrifice in the name of protecting the holiness or salvation of the rest of the community — the privileged, the elite, the hierarchies of power. We still see a form of human sacrifice in some types of modern Christianity when people are excluded or shunned or excommunicated for who they are, in the name of protecting the so-called holiness of the rest of the religious community. How terrible that is! What a betrayal of all that the Trinity teaches us! What a way to douse the light of God that we are supposed to spread!

We recognize true light because it spreads out. It warms. It draws us toward it. Light, like love, spreads infinitely. This is what Christ taught us. If God as creator called light into being, then God as Christ showed us how to spread it in the world. Reach out to our neighbour. Speak out for justice. Reach out to the forgotten, the suffering, the one hidden in that dark corner, the one who isn't seen. Forget questions of holiness, and focus instead on questions of love. Bring welcome, acceptance and dignity to the world in whatever way you can.

It isn't easy to do that! We all fail sometimes. I know I fail a lot. This is why we need God as Sustainer, as Holy Spirit to bring us the grace to make the right decisions, and to pick us up when we fail, relight our torches, and try to spread light again. Remember humans are imperfect, but God loves humans. We are a work in progress, always transforming along with the rest of the universe, always called towards the light.

Why is it so hard to believe that we were created good and that in the eyes of God we will always be good? Not perfect, but *good and beloved*. You may think that you've done little, or that you do little to spread light in the world. You may think that it takes big gestures — participating in big things, organizing things, changing structures. But no matter what we do, it's easy to feel it's not enough. There will always be room for

us to be hard on ourselves. It's helpful to remember that if all you have strength for is to light a single match by being present to the person beside you, you don't actually know how far that will go.

Let me tell you one last story about that. Gail Woods asked me recently at one of the Friday breakfasts if I was ever afraid during those years that I was teaching in Africa in my twenties. My answer was no. I felt at home in my school communities. But then I remembered: *there was this one time that I was afraid.*

THE BORDER - At the time I was teaching math in Malawi in Central Africa at a rural boarding school.

During one school holiday, my roommate Janet and I backpacked down to Victoria Falls, an incredibly beautiful waterfall on the border of Zambia and Zimbabwe. After our trip we were offered a lift back to Malawi in the back of a pick-up truck that some American Habitat for Humanity volunteers that we knew had just bought in South Africa. The journey took two days from Victoria Falls to the Malawi border, with an overnight stay in the capital Lusaka. Unfortunately, on the second day, we discovered that one of the Americans, a young man by the name of Dan, had come down with malaria. All we could do was bundle him into the cab of the pick-up, give him some medication, and head for the border. We knew the border closed at 6pm so we headed off as quickly as possible.

The roads between Lusaka and the border were in those days pitted and often one lane. (You can ask Wendy Bennett more about them later if you wish!) They wind through mountains, absolutely beautiful mountains, but where the carcasses of vehicles that have gone off-road line the valley below. The day was hot, but Janet and I were comfortable in the back of the pickup with the breeze blowing over us.

We made pretty good time, and as we approached the last half hour from the border it looked like we would make it. But then, in front of us, we saw a line of Zambian soldiers blocking the road. The soldiers waved their rifles at us indicating we should stop. We pulled over, and the soldiers, who did not look very happy, asked for passports. The three Americans who were sitting in the cab handed theirs over, and when the soldiers saw the cover and realized they were American, they ordered them out of the vehicle and told them to line up in front of it. It was 1986 and Americans were seen as allies of the all-white South African government at the time, and South Africa had recently bombed Zambia because they were helping the South African freedom fighters, that is Nelson Mandela's organization, the ANC. In the process they had hit near an orphanage. To make matters worse, of course, the plates on the truck were South African. Dan could barely sit up at this point, and his friends asked if he could stay in the car, but this only made the soldiers angrier. So the three of them stumbled out and lined up in front of the pickup.

In the meantime Janet and I sat in the back, while a soldier came around to us. He too was angry, understandably, demanding our passports. We handed them over, and all

of a sudden, everything changed! The soldier looked at the word on the front of our passports and said, “Canada, you’re from Canada?” And then he said, “Do you speak French?” “Mais, oui!” I answered, very relieved to have mostly grown up in Lennoxville Quebec. The soldier then told us that he had a beloved French Canadian teacher when he was in high school. The teacher was a priest from the White Father Missionary Order, which coincidentally had its mother house in Lennoxville Quebec, of all places! My hometown! Well, we got chatting in French, and everything was going well, until we heard a yell from the front of the truck.

Dan had begun to fall, and the soldiers had collectively raised their rifles at the Americans. It was terrifying. Our new friend didn’t hesitate. He immediately began yelling at his fellow soldiers in the language of that region, which was the same language they spoke across the border in Malawi. I knew enough of it by now to understand that he was saying, “*They’re teachers, they’re from Canada, let them go!*” There was a little argument, but he was adamant. Pretty soon we were all back in the truck heading down the road, with Janet and I waving enthusiastically at our new friend and savior as he disappeared in a cloud of red dust and into my memory.

We did make the border, and Dan recovered fully, but the memory of that day has lived in my mind for years. Because here’s the thing — *the priest had shared his light with the soldier when he was a student. That light was still spreading.* We were saved because the light from that teacher spread to that student/soldier and that man decided to spread it to us. He recognized something in us, he was able to see our humanity because someone else had shared light with him. When he saw us, he didn’t just remember French, he remembered everything he had learned from this man about welcome and acceptance and dignity. He remembered a relationship and he broadened that relationship to include us.

But here’s what I really want to focus on. Neither the priest nor the soldier know that I’m telling this story today. They don’t know that I learned something about love and hospitality and mercy from them. They don’t know that they spread their light to me or that so many decades later I’m offering the light they shared to all of you.

Remember when you think you’ve done nothing, in those dark moments that hit all of us, remember — your life may have changed the world for someone and you don’t even know it! It’s not even lunch time, and you have already shown up for this community. You have already shared your light.

Your light matters. You were born of stardust, of the breath of God — Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer — and the light of love you carry makes all the difference in the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.