

**BHAG (Big Hairy Audacious God):  
New Math 1-God.**

*Ephesians 4:4-6; John 14:11-21, 25-31.*

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South Higgins Lake, up in Michigan, is a beautiful lake. It is an interesting body of water because it is very shallow for hundreds of yards. Only a two feet deep or so for over two hundred yards, I suppose, off the beach. The water is so shallow that it is a light, pale, sky-blue.

There is a point, there, where the lake gets very deep. It's almost a sheer drop-off. The water goes from being two and a half feet deep to over twenty... thirty... forty...feet deep. In less than a foot the color of the lake goes from a light, pale blue to a deep, dark, cobalt blue.

I've been out on that lake in some pretty rough weather. The rough weather didn't unsettle me when I was in the shallow end of the lake, but when the boat went racing past that point where everything got very, very dark blue I felt fear tip-toe up my back. I knew the lake bottom was suddenly very far beneath us. I knew if the sail boat tipped over we were in deep water. There was a part of me, honestly, that wanted to turn right around and get back to the shallows.

Today we are in deep water.

Today your preacher is doing something foolish: he is going to try and lead you into a conversation about the mystery of the Trinity. That is the Christian belief that while there is One God this God is made up of Three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The smart thing to do, I suppose, would be just to ignore this whole part of what we believe about God. I think avoiding the mystery is a coward's way out, though.

We sing about the Trinity. In fact, there was a time at Trinity more than thirty years ago when every weekend worship service began with the congregation singing, *Holy, holy, holy! Lord God almighty! Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee. Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty, God in three persons, blessed Trinity.* Every time people gathered here for worship, or in the earlier building downtown, they began by singing a hymn of praise to the Trinity.

I am foolish enough to think that it is important to talk about the Trinity. To understand what it is we believe about God.

Besides, when you love someone you want to know everything you can about them, right? So would we want to be ignorant about the very person of the living God?

We're sailing into some deep water today.

Before we start, though, I want to tell you I looked through the sermons of John Wesley. Found a sermon he preached on the Trinity. Wesley, that passionate Christian and brilliant theologian who began the Methodist movement in England back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, would have something helpful to say. If anyone could make sense of the Trinity, it would be Wesley! Well, I read his sermon and he doesn't say much. Wesley basically says, "It's a mystery. Don't expect to understand it. There are a lot of

true things that are real even though we can't understand or explain them." That's what Wesley has to say in his most famous sermon on the Trinity.

We're sailing into some deep water today.

The good thing is that as we sail into the deep water today we have the Bible. God wants us to know who God is so God gave us this book. We're sailing into deep water as we explore the very nature of God, but the good news is we have the Bible as our guide!

Something very important is happening in the very first verses of the Bible. Look at Genesis 1:1-5 (TNIV): *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*<sup>2</sup> *Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.*

*<sup>3</sup> And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. <sup>4</sup> God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. <sup>5</sup> God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.*

In the very first verses of the Bible, we are introduced to God.

We are also introduced to someone the Bible calls "the Spirit of God." This Spirit, this force, this energy, is hovering over the water. Almost as if it is waiting to step in...get to work.

And, finally, the author of Genesis talks about a word. This word is spoken by God and through this word things take shape. Form comes out of chaos. Life comes out of death. Light comes out of darkness.

There is God.

There is the Spirit of God. Moving. Darting. Hovering. Stirring.

And there is a word. Genesis stresses the role of this word, as God speaks it, in the creation story: *And God said, "Let there be light." And God said, "Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water." And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation." And God said, "Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night." And God said, "Let the water teem with living creatures."*

There is God.

There is the Spirit of God.

And there is this word. This word brings life. This word brings light.

Now, I want you to turn with me to the New Testament. I want you to look with me at the opening 18 verses of the 1<sup>st</sup> Chapter of the Gospel of John. With these stunning words, these beautiful words, John introduces us to Jesus. Except John refers to Jesus as "the Word." In the first verses of Genesis there is all this emphasis on God speaking. On the word of God. And John introduces us to Jesus by referring to him as "the Word."

Let's read the first 14 verses together out loud: *<sup>1</sup> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was with God in the beginning. <sup>3</sup> Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. <sup>4</sup> In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome <sup>[a]</sup> it.*

<sup>6</sup> There was a man sent from God whose name was John. <sup>7</sup> He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. <sup>8</sup> He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

<sup>9</sup> The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. <sup>10</sup> He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. <sup>11</sup> He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. <sup>12</sup> Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— <sup>13</sup> children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

<sup>14</sup> The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only [Son], who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Now, let's read verses 16 through 18 together: <sup>16</sup> Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. <sup>17</sup> For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup> No one has ever seen God, but the one and only [Son], who is himself God and <sup>[a]</sup> is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Do you notice the similarities between the first verses of John's Gospel and the opening words in Genesis? In both sections of scripture the word brings light. The light shines, John writes, and the darkness has not overcome it. In both sections of scripture the word brings life.

We learn several things about the Trinity in these opening verses of John.

First, we discover in John that Jesus was with God in the very beginning. Jesus has always been with God. Which is a bit of a surprise. Because Jesus is referred to in verse 18 as "the one and only Son" of God. When you think about a son or daughter, you automatically assume the father or mother preceded the child. That is how things work. If I am the father of Bryan then it is self-evident that I was around before Bryan ever made his appearance. We are told in John, though, that Jesus didn't come along after God the Father had been in existence for a couple hundred million years. God the Father didn't come up with the idea of Jesus the day after God came into existence. No, we are told Jesus was with the God the Father in the very beginning.

While you notice that Jesus was with God from the very beginning, it is worth observing the Spirit was *also* with God from the very beginning. When people read Acts Chapter 2, which describes the day of Pentecost, they may think the Holy Spirit is this God's "latest new thing." Our first impression may be that the arrival of the Spirit is a new thing, a new chapter, but the Spirit of God was there in the very beginning!

The second thing we learn in these verses in John is Jesus is one through whom everything was made. When Genesis 1 tells us God speaks and things are brought into existence, we are being told Jesus is involved in every act of creation. It's almost like God the Father has this idea. Lays out the blueprints. The Son puts things together. Builds stuff. And then the Spirit, which is hovering over it all, brings it to life.

We can see, right near the beginning of Genesis, how the Spirit -or breath of God- brings a lump of clay to life! Genesis 2:7 says this: *Then the LORD God*

formed a man <sup>[a]</sup> from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

If you want another picture of how the Spirit or breath of God brings lifeless things to life, turn in your Bible to the 37<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a prophet. He had watched Israel be defeated by a foreign power, and everyone felt overwhelmed. When you feel overwhelmed, when you feel like you don't have the resources you need to respond to the life challenges all around you, what do you do? Well, you just sort of give up. You pull in. You look to the future with dread -not hope.

When people get scared they stop living.

So the prophet Ezekiel, in Chapter 37, looks at the nation of Israel and he says the people are like a valley of dry, disconnected, lifeless bones. God tells the prophet to start speaking God's word to the dry bones.

Listen to Ezekiel 37:4-10: *Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!' <sup>5</sup> This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath <sup>[a]</sup> enter you, and you will come to life. <sup>6</sup> I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.' "*

*<sup>7</sup> So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. <sup>8</sup> I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.*

*<sup>9</sup> Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.' " <sup>10</sup> So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.*

If you have a TNIV Bible, look at the footnote for verse 5. (Footnotes are comments that Bible experts put in the margins or at the bottoms of the pages in your Bible so you can better understand a passage of scripture.) The footnote in my Bible says this: *The Hebrew word for (breath) can also mean wind or spirit.*

The Son was with the Father from the beginning.

The Spirit was with the Father from the beginning.

God had the idea.

Jesus put things together.

The Spirit brought things to life.

There is a third thing we learn about God -and the Trinity- in these opening verses of John: we learn that through Jesus gives us -if we receive him- the right to become children of God.

John says if we receive Jesus then he gives us the right to become children of God. We're God's children not because of the perfection of our faith, or the perfection and generosity of our lives, or the perfection of our smile or the perfection of our knowledge of spiritual mysteries, but we're God's children because Jesus loves us. Jesus says we belong to the Father.

There have been more than a few times in the lives of our three sons when they were less than enthusiastic to claim me as their dad, I hunch. My jokes are bad. My

old Duke t-shirts sometimes have holes in them. I am a preacher which isn't the coolest thing for a teenager or college student to have their dad doing. They have seen me in the middle of a lot of very human moments. So, I suspect, they sometimes have hesitated to claim me as their dad.

Except there was that day when Nathan was pulled over. Between Fort Wayne and New Haven. Nathan was driving along, moving kind of fast, when a New Haven police officer pulled him over. The officer came up, took Nathan's driver's license, and went back to his squad car. A few minutes later the officer came back to Nathan and asked, "Is your Dad the pastor at New Haven United Methodist Church? I got married there six months ago and I think he officiated at our wedding. Is that guy your Dad?"

Nathan said, "Yes, that would be my Dad."

Nathan got a warning.

Most of the time we are hesitant to claim God as our Father, to identify ourselves as children of God, but it isn't because we are ashamed of God but it is because we are convinced we are unworthy. Of course, we're right! We are unworthy but God sends Jesus and Jesus we belong to the Father. And if you receive him, if you believe him, then you become a child of God, born not of natural descent "but born of God."

The fourth thing we learn about the Trinity, in this opening chapter of John, is there is some room between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. What do I mean by "room?" I mean they are different Persons. That is how the early Church fathers described the three parts of the Trinity: One God and Three Persons.

The members of the Trinity are distinct enough that they, according to John 1:18, have a relationship with one another. You can't have a relationship with someone unless you are two different people.

There is some room between each person of the Trinity.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit are distinct from one another. They are three different Persons.

The fifth thing we learn in John 1 is that not only is Jesus in a relationship with the Father, that the Persons of the Trinity are distinct from one another, but they are the same.

Now this is where my head begins to hurt. This is where we begin pushing the mystery. This is where the water is way over my head.

The Three Persons of the Trinity are different from one another...they're distinct. Capable of having a conversation with one another. We've just said that, right?

The Bible says, though, that they are the same. You know one, you know the other. You see one, you've seen the other. The Three Persons of the Trinity are distinct from one another but they are the same, according to the Bible.

In John 14:10 Jesus says, "*I am in the Father, and...the Father is in me.*"

In John 14:16 Jesus promises to ask the Father to send his followers the Spirit of truth. In verse 26 Jesus says the Father will send the Spirit in the name of Jesus, and then Jesus points out that the Spirit will remind them of everything Jesus has said to them. Jesus and the Spirit are on the same wavelength. The Spirit will not show up with a completely new message about a new kind of God, but the Holy Spirit will turn us

back to Jesus. Help us remember the lessons we have been taught by Jesus. Grow us up in Jesus.

The Persons of the Trinity are different...and they are the same. To know one is to know the other. To love one is to love the other.

There are three last things I need to say about the Trinity.

The first thing is this: **God exists in community.** We talk a lot around here about the importance of community...belonging...small groups. We talk a lot around here about how God never meant for us to do life on our own. As some isolated cell cut off from others. All this talk about God as Three Persons is a reminder that God gives us the pattern for our lives, and God lives in community.

The Father has the Son.

And the Son has the Spirit.

And the Spirit has the Father...and the Son.

God isn't alone but God exists in community.

At the very heart of God there is community...fellowship.

Here is the second thing about the Trinity: **each member of the Trinity points us to the other Persons of the Trinity.**

Each member of the Trinity wants to help us fall in love, open up, to the other members of the Trinity.

There is this last thing I have to say: **the Trinity isn't something to be explained or diagramed, it is not a theological principle, but it is a product of our experience with God.** The understanding of God as Three in One isn't something a bunch of scholars sat around and thought up, but God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is something that became obvious as people walked with God...talked with God...grew up into God.

The Trinity is how we talk about God because our experience with God is that God has Three Persons.

We talk about the Trinity because it is the only way of talking about our experience of God that makes sense.

God, in the Three Persons of the Trinity, has a way of reaching us.

This is true in my own life.

God finds me.

God shows up and where I am standing...walking...sitting...sleeping...is holy ground.

You know how it is, right?

## **GOD THE FATHER.**

Last year we drove down into a meadow outside Estes Park to wait for the moon rise. The moon was a full or nearly full moon. So we drove down to this meadow, near a trout stream, and threw a blanket over a picnic table. A hundred yards away a few willow trees huddled by the small river as it wound its way across the meadow.

We waited and waited. It was a silly thing to do: waiting out in that air that was suddenly much colder than we had expected. The day had been warm but now suddenly the air was cold.

The moon seemed to be taking forever. Forever. A part of me -a very large part of me!- wanted to get in the car and head back towards the small bed and breakfast where we staying along the Thompson River.

There was this glow on the other side of the mountain as the moonlight began to fill the world on the other side of the mountain just to the east. We still stood deep in the shadows, deep in the darkness, but then the moon light began lighting up the snow fields on the mountains to the west. We could see what had been invisible in the darkness just moments before. And then the valley was filled with light. Filled with moonlight. We could see across the meadow. We could see the river winding its dark way across the fields. We could make out every boulder...every tree.

You may have questions about Jesus, you may have questions about how the Spirit works, but God was saying, "I'm here...do you see...even you can't miss this...can't miss me, can you?" In it all the Father was saying, "I want you to love me and trust me and joy in me."

## **JESUS.**

There are times when Jesus shows up. We have all our questions, all our reasons why we're not sure about Jesus, and then we'll stumble across some moment in one of the Gospels and Jesus wins us over.

Sometimes the world is such a mess. A typhoon hits southeast Asia, an earthquake causes misery and death in Haiti, and we're not sure about all this talk of a loving God. We think the God behind Creation can be trusted but we don't know. The God behind the Creation seems hidden and mysterious.

I don't know about you, but I need a face for God.

I don't know about you, but I understand the frustration of Moses out in the wilderness. Hearing the voice out of the burning bush and wanting to know God's name. God speaks to Moses out of the burning bush and Moses is curious. He walks over to get a better look and God says, "Do not come any closer." (Exodus 3:5). Moses is so overwhelmed by the holiness of God that he hides his face. He's afraid to look at God. Then, Moses asks God, "What is your name?" I think that is Moses' way of saying, "I need a face. I need to see you." God and Moses have an amazing relationship, but God is often hidden in the clouds.

It may be silly, it may be immature, but I need a face for God.

I need someone I can see...someone who might understand me.

A full moon over Colorado mountains takes my breath away. Standing in a stream fishing for trout takes my breath away. Looking into the eyes of a child, or understanding how the universe just sort of hangs together in space, takes my breath away. I realize every bit of ground we stand on is holy ground and God is God.

I need a face, though.

I need a God who has skin.

I need a God who has a voice that talks about the things that fill my life. Who can get down to my level and help me understand what to do when I have been hurt. Who can get down to my level and help me avoid getting swallowed up by bitterness or

greed or ambition or lust or envy. Who can get down to my level and help me understand how to take life one day at a time and trust that God cares as much about us as God cares about the birds of the air or the flowers of the fields. I need a God who has a voice and can talk with me about the danger of judging others, focusing on their faults while missing entirely my own brokenness and meanness. I need a God who gets close enough to warn me that sometimes the best way is the narrow way, and the broad, wide-open easy thing leads to hell and death and regret. I need a God who knows what it is like to be tired, to be tempted, to be so hungry in the middle of a Sabbath day that you start picking grain out of the field and cherries off the trees. I need a God who knows what it is to be scared and lonely...and still trust God.

Maybe it is just me but I need a face for God.

Jesus shows up.

I see him. I hear him. I love him. I trust him. And I want to know the God he loves...the God he prays to... I love Jesus and I want to know and love the God he knows.

## **THE SPIRIT.**

Sometimes I need more than the glory of the stars, the miracle of hydrogen and light, and sometimes I need more than to soaking myself in the stories and teachings of Jesus we have in the New Testament. I need more. I need God moving and acting and working right now. Here. In the stuff of our lives.

There are times when the Spirit shows up.

God shows up as the Spirit.

Hovering over the surface of the chaos and darkness that our life may have become.

God shows up as the Spirit. Breathing new life into a life that has become not much more than disconnected, dried up old bones. Helping me trust the Father when trust has become a difficult thing for me. Helping me fall in love with Jesus all over again when I have been in danger of forgetting my first love.

I don't know why I am about to tell you this story but I am. I don't know what it has to do with the Holy Spirit but I think it is all about the Spirit.

It was late in the afternoon. I was walking around the church talking on my cell phone. As I walked past the children's play area on the west side of the church I noticed four older elementary children -two of them may have been 7<sup>th</sup> graders- playing on the equipment. Someone had knocked the top off the play tree house. Had the plastic top of the tree house on the ground. And someone else had thrown gravel all over the sidewalk.

I didn't need that. I didn't like that. So I ended my phone call, walked over to the play area, leaned on the fence, and said, "Hi, guys. What's going on?" They all looked very pleased to see me.

"Who knocked the top off the tree house?" I asked.

The two youngest, after about a ten second silence, said they had done it. I told them they were kind of big to be playing in that children's play area, and I told them pulling the top of the tree was not a nice thing to do.

One boy said, "I can put it back on."

"I'd appreciate that," I said.

Then, I said, "You know these people in the church love you guys. They gave money so you would have this place. Like the gym. It is for you. These people love providing the gym and Upward Basketball. This building was built for you. But I get sad when people mess with it."

The youngest boy smiled broadly and said, "We had our music program in the gym. It's awesome!"

I asked about the gravel on the sidewalk. The youngest two boys pointed at the older boy.

"Why'd you do that?" I asked.

He shrugged.

"I want you to come with me and we're going to get a broom," I said. "I'd like to ask you to clean it off."

"Okay," I said to the three boys and the girl, "I want you guys to come inside with me. I want you to apologize to Ms. Huffman. Shirley is responsible for this whole, big building, and she tries to keep it just right. I want you to tell her what you did."

The group moved slowly. The older boy hung back.

"Come on," I said. "No one is calling the police. It's cool."

We walked into the church office. It was about 15 minutes before 5. Only Shirley was around. I led the small, reluctant parade into her office. Shirley looked surprised. I explained what the boys had been doing. They said they were sorry.

Shirley smiled and said, "Thanks for saying you're sorry. But I had you all on camera...on video tape." The four crowded into her office and were surprised to see themselves on the video that runs from the cameras around the building. They took turns stepping out into the hallway, waving their arms, so that their friends in Shirley's office could see them on the video.

Then, Shirley led them down the hallway to get the older boy a broom to use on the sidewalk.

About 20 minutes later I was walking to my car. I thanked the kids for helping out. Asked them to keep their eyes open and watch out for the church. And I told them about Summer Club. Upward Basketball. One of the children said they all used to go to church but had stopped. So I encouraged them to come here on the weekends...told them you are cool people and they'd like it, I think.

The youngest shouted, "You have any snacks?"

I shook my head, "No." I explained that all we had in the office was Diet Coke, Caffeine Free. It was warm outside and all four said, "That's great!" One boy said, "Diet Coke is what I drink...I'm diabetic!"

So we marched back into the church. I got into the work room refrigerator and pulled out a cold pop for each of them. Asked them to leave the empty cans outside the office door and I would get them later. Recycle them.

Then, the girl noticed the open door to my office. "Wow...you have nice furniture in there," she said. The boys wandered into my office and saw my die cast toy airplanes and Matchbox cars. "You've got cool toys!" they said. I told them that, yep, I had cool toys. And that people used my office as a place to meet.

The girl noticed the pictures of Ella and Olivia hung all over my office door. "Oh, they are really cute!" she said.

We walked back outside in the sun. Into the heat. All four were hanging close to me. Holding their cans of pop. Chattering about the day and school and maybe looking over the gym and how cool the church was.

We were all sort of glowing.

It had been a long day, full of hard stuff around here, and we were all sort of glowing. There was this energy, this life, this joy...around us.

We shook hands. I looked them straight in the face and told them that getting to meet them, hanging out with them for a few minutes, had been about the coolest part of my day.

I don't know why I tell you this story.

I don't know if it has anything to do with the Spirit of God that shows up in the middle of our lives and changes things...changes us. But maybe it does.

God in Three Persons.

One reaches us when the others don't quite work for us.

Each one getting our attention in their own way, calling us back into a relationship with God, and pointing to the other members of the Trinity.

The Father wanting us to notice the Son.

The Son pointing us to the Father.

The Spirit hovering, working, engaging, breathing life into us, opening us up to the possibility of faith...moving us towards the Father...helping us know and live what the Son taught us.

God the Father.

God the Son.

God the Spirit.

If one doesn't get you, doesn't pull you into a relationship with God, the other one will...