

In the name of our Holy One, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

One day, about two thousand ago, Jesus was in the midst of his ministry. During that time, he walked from village to village with his disciples. Together they had shared some pretty incredible moments and they reflected on the things that happened as they walked. They noticed that the crowds had seemed to grow larger and larger with each opportunity Jesus had to teach them. After a series of such notable events, Jesus had a chat with Andrew, Peter and John. At a pause in the conversation, Jesus asked his companions, "Who do people say that I am?" Andrew said, "Some people say you are John the Baptist returned from the dead!" John said, "Yes, that's true. But some others say that you are Elias or one other of the prophets that they have been longing to see return."

Jesus considered those responses for a moment, and then he asked, "But who do you all think that I am, you all who know me the best?" Peter took a deep breath, looked directly at Jesus and said, "You are the son of God."

Jesus knew that he had a unique relationship with God. He did not know how that happened or why it happened but he knew without question that it did happen.

In fact, It was about three hundred and twenty-five years after Jesus died that followers of Christ were able to put in writing *their* understanding of Jesus and God and the relationship between them. What they came up with are the words we know as the Nicene Creed. Fifty-six years after the Creed was articulated, three men in Cappadocia to define what we now commonly refer to as The Holy Trinity. The three of them sum up that relationship kind of like this: "Jesus was one of the three in one, the Logos, who existed before time, brought to us by an act of God's will, begotten not made, in perfect unity with God the Father and God the Spirit each acting inseparably

and interpenetrating with each other. Jesus is of the same substance as the Father.”

But that’s all theological jargon; it makes sense only after you sit down and spend some time working through it. The bottom line is that the Cappadocians put into language a description of what humans the experience in relationship with God. Think for a moment about the ways that we know God: we know God as Creator; we sense and feel God as Jesus - Jesus who reveals God through love; and it is God as Holy Spirit who is the source of our human loving activity. The whole thing is a profound mystery.

It’s a mystery that is hard for humans to understand; it was in ancient times and it continues to be a challenge for us today. Perhaps we never will be able to explain it; at least not in any scientific or empirical sense. You may have heard me say on occasion that I am an avid fan of modern day murder mysteries: like PD James books, Netflix and Amazon series like Goliath or The Americans. What I love about those mysteries is that they always get solved. The questions get answers, the problems resolved and the perpetrators get nabbed. They get solved because there are lots of tools available to us in the twenty-first century - including DNA, video cameras and cell phone records, plus the old standbys of fingerprints and ballistics tests. Science and technology these days leave very little to the imagination. So precisely because so much is provable and verifiable, it may be even harder for us in modern times to embrace the mystery of God than it was for people in Jesus’ day.

John’s gospel tells us that some people in the crowds that heard Jesus teach decided that *understanding* Jesus was too much of a challenge. Jesus claimed to be the true bread of life, God’s gift of sustenance made available to ALL people. This was

enormously confusing to people who had grown up hearing the story of God sending manna, bread from heaven, to save the Hebrew people from starving in the desert. If that was bread from God, how could Jesus be bread from God, too? The people gathered around Jesus in John's gospel from today said in response to that claim, "This is a difficult teaching." Indeed! It was then and it is now. But that is not a reason to brush off what Jesus said. It is not a cause for turning away. It was instead a good reason to ask Jesus more questions about what he meant. I wish they had chosen to do that instead of giving up. I wish more people today would ask hard questions of their faith leaders instead of letting questions lead them away from knowing more. Asking questions does not diminish our faith. Instead, digging in and discussing our questions together strengthens our faith. A community that wades through faith questions together becomes an amazing instrument of God's compassion and mercy in the world.

In this life, each human being is presented with an option to choose God, to understand and know and follow God's will for us. A passage in Deuteronomy puts that choice rather dramatically. In Deuteronomy 30 God makes it plain to the newly formed Hebrew people that to choose God means to choose life, to choose otherwise means to choose death. I venture to say that we here today have opted for the former, we have opted to choose a life committed to God. In the Christian domain, we have the opportunity to follow the biblical adventure of the Hebrew people past Deuteronomy, through the judges and then through the kings and the prophets. After the prophets we come to the birth of a boy in Bethlehem. It is at that point in the adventure that we find that choosing God means choosing Christ. It means choosing to believe that God in

Christ has our backs and is with us through all our ups and downs. It means believing that God is there even when in life's darkest moments God seems viscerally absent. It means hanging on to faith in the midst of doubt and confusion.

John's gospel tells us that some people were discouraged because they couldn't understand Jesus' message for them and so walked away. They doubted that Jesus could really be the Messiah. Do we doubt it? Does our more-and-more secular world today doubt it? Maybe. But doubt is not a bad thing. It can be the one thing that can move us toward an even stronger faith. That's what happened to Peter.

When Jesus asked Peter who he thought he was, scripture tells us that Peter said, "You are the Son of God." But it's hard to know how convinced Peter was of his own words. You see, not long after he proclaimed Jesus as holy, he was questioned by the Jewish authorities whether he was one of Jesus' followers; and he denied it, even denied that he ever knew Jesus. But that wasn't the end of the story. Peter stayed with the mystery, in spite of that denial, or maybe because of it, he never gave up pursuing God. Or was it the other way around, God and Christ never gave up pursuing Peter?

Our faith is all about the mysterious nature of God's relationship with us, through Christ and through the Holy Spirit. We accept that even though we cannot prove in any scientific way what that relationship is, we know that God is working in us and through us. The mystery of God continually works ON us to bring about God's will. That will is the way of Christ, the way of love.