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Isaiah 6: 1 – 8
Romans 8: 12 – 17

Ps. 29
John 3: 1 – 17

Impressionism is a school of art developed and made famous in Paris in the 1870's and 80's by such artists as Renoir and Monet. Impressionist paintings are characterized by small, yet visible brush strokes that emphasize the momentary and transient effects of light which then reveal movement and experience. If viewed from up close, the paintings seemingly make no sense at all. It is only in stepping away that the brush strokes hint at images, leaving them ill-defined and yet, still in relationship with one another. Vivid, unmuted and unblended colors take precedence over lines and contours. Unexpected perspectives give new insights to quite ordinary subject matter. I wonder if Impressionism might be a lens through which to consider the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit; Creator, Redeemer and Giver of Life; Lover, Beloved and Love?

Much ink and paper have been expended trying to work out an understanding of our God and the inner workings of the Trinity, if not in images, then in words. But it is simply not possible. And really, would a god that we could understand really be God? If we look for God in our day to day, ordinary lives, we can perhaps see those small, yet visible brush strokes that illuminate and color our experiences. Momentary and transient brush strokes that hint at meaning and purpose, but which are never quite clearly defined until we step back and consider the larger picture. There are things which don't seem to make any sense at the time until we see how the individual strokes form the whole.

In the long-standing tradition of Christian mysticism, there are two primary ways of knowing: kataphatic and apophatic. Kataphatic means 'seen according to light,' while apophatic means 'against the light.' Kataphatic speaks to knowing something in a 'positive' way, defining what something *is*. Apophatic speaks to knowing in the negative way of darkness, defining what something *is not*. Kataphatic knowing relies on defined words, clear concepts, pictures, rituals. Apophatic knowing goes beyond words and images, into silence and contemplation, darkness, open space and letting go of the need to know. [Richard Rohr, *The Divine Dance*, p. 142] (Prayer: K = BCP, liturgy; A = centering) These two, kataphatic and apophatic, are sort of yin and yang. They are both necessary to keep the faithful balanced, humble and open.

I wonder if viewing through a lens of Impressionism isn't sort of blending those two ways of knowing? A way of not needing to have exact outlines, a way that is beyond images and words, and yet allows room for color *and* contemplation, for ritual *and* release. A way that allows for new, unexpected perspectives of quite ordinary things. A way of letting what we think we have experienced of God and what lies beyond in the Mystery that *is* God to dance and move and shimmer in the Divine Light.

Today, we hear the wonderful story of Nicodemus, the Pharisee who comes to visit Jesus one night. Now, Nicodemus gets a lot of bad press – maybe he comes at night so no one will see him, why is he so obtuse, etc. But let's reconsider his story. Nicodemus has obviously experienced Jesus already in the Temple. Jesus has made an impression on him. Perhaps Jesus' teachings have begun to make inroads into his thinking. I wonder if Nicodemus is not caught between the kataphatic and the apophatic – the need for words and clear images and certainty and laws, and his expanding concept of how God might be at work. I wonder if Nicodemus finds himself standing too close, and suddenly the brush strokes don't seem to connect or make sense. Rabbis traditionally study at night, and I wonder if

he suddenly runs down the darkened streets of the city to find Jesus – much like we might suddenly Google something – so that he can step back and get a different perspective.

Before there is doctrine or dogma, there is experience. And our experience of God is always more important than sorting out the doctrine and dogma. And the multitude of ways in which folks over the centuries have tried to define and contain the idea of the Trinity are simply a multitude of ways of trying to find adequate words to convey their experiences of God.

Frederick Buechner writes: *“The much-maligned doctrine of the Trinity is an assertion that, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, there is only one God. Father, Son and Holy Spirit mean that the mystery beyond us, the mystery among us, and the mystery within us are all the same mystery. Thus the Trinity is a way of saying something about us and the way we experience God.”*

So, I want to open this up and give us a chance to say something about the way we have experienced God.

- To whom do you find yourself praying? Do you pray to the cosmic, transcendent, omniscient God? An immanent, personal, potter-and-we-are-the-clay God? To Jesus? In the power of the Spirit?
- Is there a time, or have there been times, in your life when you have clearly felt the presence of God? What was the context? What was that experience like? What makes you understand that experience as ‘of God?’
- Miguel Escobar, today’s writer in *Forward Day by Day*, in noting that today is Trinity Sunday, when we celebrate a ‘doctrine describing the way one God-essence is depicted and experienced as three persons,’ says that years ago, he came across an idea that ‘adds some heart to this fairly stiff theological idea.’ And that is the idea that each of us will connect with one ‘person’ of God at different times in our lives. Escobar gives an example from his life:
 - as a child in the beautiful hill country of Texas – God the Father/Creator
 - young adult – the rebellious Jesus
 - adult – he’s learning to practice listening for the subtle voice of the Holy Spirit in his life

Can you relate to this idea? Have you focused on one part of the Trinity more at various times in your life? Where are you now?

Richard Rohr writes about blessing one’s self, which some of us choose to do and others don’t, by making the sign of the cross in the name of our triune God. He has a lot more to say about it, but he notes that this little prayer is often seen as both a shielding and an honoring of the body itself: (please join me if you are comfortable with this)

1. We begin, he says, with the forehead, honoring our thoughts and minds as the source or the beginning point of all our decisions to act: “In the name of the Father...” is certainly offering our thoughts and our mind to God as the Ultimate Source.
2. Then we move directly downward, crossing over our heart, toward the solar plexus, or stomach, which is certainly blessing our own enfleshment and incarnation as the Body of Christ: “And of the Son...”
3. And now, trusting in and enjoying the flow, we cross our body from shoulder to shoulder, again crossing the heart, and crossing the entire world of variety and differentiation from shoulder to shoulder, and say, “And of the Holy Spirit.” And then we stand inside of this Trinitarian wholeness and identity, and simply marvel. +