

Church of the Savior – Episcopal  
Orange City, Iowa  
19 June 2011  
Trinity Sunday – First Sunday after Pentecost  
Dr. Donald Wacome, Lay Preacher  
  
Matthew 28.16-20

### **Now We Know**

Today's passage which concludes Matthew's Gospel brings to mind the story of the little girl in Sunday school. Paying no attention to the lesson, she's at work with her crayons, furiously drawing. The teaching finally asks, "*What are you drawing?*" "*I'm drawing a picture of God,*" she answers. The teacher gently says, "*But you can't draw a picture of God. No one knows what he looks like.*" "*Well,*" she replies, "*they will when I get through!*" In the closing scene in Matthew, Jesus has finished his work, and now—at last—his disciples know who he is and, in knowing this, see who God is. So their task, Jesus tells them, is to tell everyone else.

Mark's Gospel—in the form we have it, at least—is famously incomplete. It ends abruptly as Mary James' mother and Mary Magdalene flee Jesus' empty tomb in terror. But Matthew's Gospel, as we see in today's lesson, ends in a no less inconclusive way. The disciples, minus Judas, have made it the sixty or so miles from Jerusalem to Galilee to rendezvous with Jesus at a previously designated, but in the documents we have, unnamed mountain. There Jesus commands them, in words that we now call the *Great Commission*, to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Gospel concludes with Jesus reminding them that he will always be with them. And then what happens? Do they all hike down the mountain and go out to dinner together? We don't know. What we

*imagine* is Jesus ascending from this mountaintop, being taken up into heaven, while the eleven disciples come down to get about the business of preaching the gospel.

It would be convenient, so far as tying up loose narrative ends goes, if the Ascension occurred here. Even though it might be incongruous for Jesus to assure them he is not going to leave them and then immediately leave them: “*And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. Goodbye.*” In any event, there’s no way to square this account with what Luke records. He tells us that Jesus ascended from the Mount of Olives, just outside Jerusalem. It’s not at all clear how to fit the event Matthew reports into the overall sequence of post-resurrection appearances of Jesus.

We have better luck when we try to fit it into the structure of his Gospel. Matthew does not tell us where this mountain is, other than that it’s in Galilee. At other points he describes Jesus going up a mountain to deliver the “Sermon on the Mount” (ch. 5), and later to feed a large crowd with a few loaves and fishes (ch. 15). Another time, Jesus goes up a mountain by himself to pray (ch. 14). Distinct from whatever mountain or mountains Matthew refers to in these texts, there’s the mountain on which the Transfiguration occurs. This seems to be a different place: it’s described as a *high* mountain, not a likely venue for preaching to, or feeding, crowds of people.

What’s revealed up there is Jesus’ unique authority. His face glows, like the face of Moses, Israel’s great lawgiver, when he came down from his encounter with God on Sinai. But out of the cloud comes the very voice of God, commanding the disciples to listen to Jesus because he—no one else, not even Moses to whose ancient authority the Pharisees constantly appeal—is God’s beloved son. We have to see the Transfiguration in the context of the Gospel of Matthew, where the question of who has authority, who really speaks for God, Jesus or the scribes and

Pharisees, occupies center stage. We're forced to decide: Who really shows us God, Jesus, who heals the paralyzed man on the Sabbath, or the Pharisees, who obsess about the fact that Jesus broke the religious rules to do it? Or who reveals what God is like: Jesus, who seems most at home with lowlifes and outcasts, or the Scribes, who take care to keep clear on who is pure enough for God? Who speaks with authority? Who acts in the name of God? Early on, after Jesus comes down from giving the Sermon on the Mount, the crowds were astonished, for Jesus taught as one having authority, and not as their scribes (7.28-29). In the middle of the narrative, at the Transfiguration, God the Father speaks from heaven, endorsing Jesus as the beloved who has the right to speak for him (17.5). Finally, Matthew brings his gospel to its conclusion, portraying Jesus, after his death and resurrection, at last explicitly claiming this authority for himself: "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*" (28.18).

As at the Transfiguration, here at Jesus' final appearance in Matthew there is confusion about worshipping Jesus. His first time up the mountain, Peter had impetuously proposed setting up three 'booths,' so Jesus could be revered as equal to Moses and Elijah, and thereby elicited God's command to listen to Jesus, his beloved son. In today's text we read that when they saw Jesus on the mountain, some of the disciples worshiped, but some doubted. I'd conjecture that it was the three disciples who were at the Transfiguration, Peter, James, and John, who at long last grasp who Jesus is and fall down in worship. The rest, who were not at the Transfiguration and hear about it only after the resurrected Jesus tells the disciples to go to Galilee and meet him at that mountain, the one where those three experienced something they did not tell the others about, don't yet know what to make of the resurrected Jesus. Jesus' response to their doubts about worshipping him is simply to claim the authority, an authority which can only be God's— it's *all* authority in earth and heaven—and then to exercise it, commanding the disciples to go

and make disciples everywhere. Matthew concludes his story of Jesus with a decisive resolution of the bitter, and finally fatal, polemic that pervades the book: Jesus has the authority to speak in God's name, to show us who God really is.

We could, I think, go further with this interpretation, bringing in the episode from near the beginning of Matthew's Gospel where Jesus, after being baptized by John, is tempted in the wilderness. The Devil takes Jesus to a very high mountain and there, showing him all the kingdoms of the world, implicitly claiming authority over them—they're his to give away—invites Jesus to worship him in exchange for them. These three high altitude events, one at the beginning, one in the middle, and one at the end of Matthew, each focused on the Gospel's pervasive theme of Jesus' authority to be heard, obeyed, and worshiped, as the genuine self-revelation of God, play a theologically important structural role in the book (irrespective of interesting, but maybe unimportant, questions about their literal historicity.)

However, today is Trinity Sunday, and my assignment is to say something about the Trinity. So I should reflect on the Trinitarian formula in our text: "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit!*" To do that, I propose that we recall last week's lesson from the Gospel of John which is in some ways a parallel text. It's a week after the resurrection, but the confused and frightened disciples are hunkered down behind locked doors. Suddenly, Jesus is there with them. "*Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*" Here, as in today's text from Matthew, Jesus commissions his disciples, but instead of invoking the Trinitarian formula, he breathes on them and says, "*Receive the Holy Spirit*" (John 20.19-22). The symbolic weight of this is mostly lost to us. But for the disciples, for whom the underlying identity of *breath*, or *air*, or *wind* and *spirit* would have been obvious, the meaning would have been clear. The resurrected Jesus is no

ghost; he's fully alive. And despite their betrayal he is not angry; he brings forgiveness and peace. And he breathes his breath—his spirit—into them. Jesus and his disciples now breathe the same air. And this means that now they live the same life. What makes Jesus alive is now what makes them alive. The Spirit of God. Their old life superseded by a new, supernatural life. And this life, in turn, is the life Jesus shares with God the Father. Jesus has brought his disciples—now his friends, his brothers—into the very life of God. So *of course* what they now go out to do in the world, to spread forgiveness, to teach mercy, to heal, is God at work in the world. And of course as they go about God's work in the world, they are bringing more and more of the rest of us into this life shared with God.

We moderns (or post-moderns, as some of you think you are), are at a remove from the pre-scientific world in which the biblical writers, taking for granted the ancient *vitalist* idea that mere matter, inert and lifeless on its own, comes to life only when air, that is breath, that is spirit, animates it, made the connection to God as creator and origin of life: it's God's spirit that gives life—breath—to all living things. The *wind (ruah)* that sweeps over the face of the waters in this morning's reading from the Genesis creation story is no less God's life-giving spirit. And, as the Old Testament narrative develops, we see that this spirit sometimes is specially concentrated in specific individuals, who thus are not merely alive, but share God's life in an explicit way. They are called to take up God's perspective, to identify with his purposes, and to draw on his strength to carry out his work.

What our forebears took literally for us becomes a rich family of metaphors. We know that air is just tiny bits of nitrogen and oxygen, and that the trick of biological life is achieved by crazily complex, but for all that mundane, microscopic mechanics. But this doesn't stand in the way of confessing that God truly is the source of all that lives. Thus our daily creed: "*We believe in the*

*Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.*” Nor does it keep us from finding that, as we turn to Jesus in faith, we come to share God’s life, the everlasting life of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.

This is what it means to be baptized in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit: it’s to be welcomed to share in the life they everlastingly share with one another, and which they call us to share. To breath the same air as the Holy and Undivided Trinity. Now we know what God is like: he is the God who wants to be *Immanuel*, God with us, for our lives to be in his, and his in ours. He is the God who remains with us despite our best efforts to do without him, to do him in.

Sara Miles, preaching at St. Gregory’s in San Francisco, once compared God to the woman who has the ugliest baby in the whole world, but she looks upon this smelly, gormless, drooling little thing with perfect love, treating it as the most wonderful thing in the world. Miles went on to say that, “God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit *long* to fold all beloved creation back into the wholeness of God” (“Come Back to the Table” May 11, 2011.) This is not, by a long shot, the kind of God we would dream up. It’s not in some ways even a God we can be comfortable with, a God embarrassingly indiscriminate in his loves. Lots of times I feel closer to those first century Jews New Testament scholar Gerd Lüdemann describes in his book, *The Unholy in Holy Scripture*: they were so worried that some sinner might profane God’s name that they stopped saying it out loud. God’s holy name was spoken only in the Temple worship, at the priestly blessing and on the Day of Atonement in the penitential prayers of the high priest in the innermost sanctum so that no Gentile could hear it. After the destruction of the Temple the pronunciation was lost, so the name of God continued only as a written sign, not as a living, word on the lips of human beings. So thank God people like me don’t get the last word. God

himself has spoken: Jesus lived, Jesus was crucified, Jesus was resurrected, Jesus ascended, and Jesus lives, not in sight but still with us. And so now we know what God looks like.

*Amen.*