

# Athanasius Against the World

## *Trinity Sunday*

Genesis 1:1-2:4a | Acts 2:14a, 22-36 | Matthew 28:16-20

### **Introduction**

There is a question that almost nobody asks on Trinity Sunday, but nearly everyone is thinking: does this actually matter?

You can understand why. The Trinity is the one Sunday a year when pastors pull out diagrams and triangles, when the word "homoousios" gets dusted off, when the sermon feels more like a theology lecture than a word of grace. People sit politely. They nod. They go home. And somewhere in the back of the mind is a quiet suspicion that this is the kind of doctrine that matters to academics and councils and church historians, but does not really change anything about Monday morning.

That suspicion is precisely what we need to address today. Because the doctrine of the Trinity is not a theological puzzle invented by committee. It is how God has revealed Himself, from the first verse of the Bible to the final command of Jesus Christ before His ascension. And there was a man, many centuries ago, who understood this so completely that he was willing to be exiled five times rather than let it go. His name was Athanasius of Alexandria. His story is the key to understanding everything we read this morning.

### **The Man Who Would Not Budge**

In the fourth century, a priest in Alexandria named Arius began teaching something that sounded reasonable, even humble: that Jesus Christ was not truly God, but rather the first and greatest of all God's creations. Not eternal, not of the same divine substance as the Father, but a kind of supreme heavenly being, exalted above all others, through whom God made the world. Jesus was like God. Jesus was close to God. Jesus was the highest of all creatures. But Jesus was not God.

This teaching spread like fire through the Roman world. Emperors adopted it. Bishops embraced it. Council after council was convened to find some compromise. The Nicene Creed was written in 325 AD to answer Arius directly: the Son is "of the same substance" as the Father, truly God of truly God. But the fight did not end at Nicaea. It dragged on for decades, and the man who refused every compromise was Athanasius, who became

bishop of Alexandria and was subsequently exiled by five different emperors for his refusal to yield.

When he was told that the entire world had turned against him, that every bishop and every emperor demanded he make peace with the Arians, Athanasius gave the answer that history has never forgotten: "If the world is against Athanasius, then Athanasius is against the world." Athanasius contra mundum. Athanasius against the world.

Now here is the crucial question: why? Was he simply stubborn? Was this a bishop protecting his turf, refusing to lose an argument?

No. Athanasius understood one thing with perfect clarity: if Jesus Christ is not truly God, there is no salvation. Only God can forgive sins. Only God can conquer death. Only God can give eternal life. If Jesus is the highest creature rather than the eternal Son, then what happened on the cross is the death of a very great man, not the atoning sacrifice of the one who bears the sins of the world. If Jesus is not truly God, then He cannot truly save. And if He cannot truly save, we are still in our sins.

Athanasius was not fighting over words. He was fighting for the gospel. He was fighting because he had read his Bible, and he knew that God had been revealing Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit from the very first moment of creation.

### **In the Beginning**

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." Already in that first verse there is more than meets the eye. The Hebrew word for God here is Elohim, a plural form used with a singular verb, a grammatical pattern that would have puzzled any Hebrew reader. Then the text continues: "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters." The Spirit of God, moving, brooding, present and active before the first word is spoken.

And then God speaks. "Let there be light." The creation comes into being through the spoken Word of God. Everything that exists comes to be because God speaks it into existence. The Gospel of John, looking back at this same moment, will say: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him." The same Word who hovered over the chaos, who said "let there be light," who breathed life into Adam, is the Word who would take on flesh in the fullness of time.

And then, on the sixth day, God says something that stops you cold: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." Us. Our. Who is God talking to? Not the angels. Man is not made in the image of angels. God is speaking within Himself, the eternal conversation of Father, Son, and Spirit, and out of that conversation comes the crown of creation.

The Trinity is not imported into the Bible from Greek philosophy. It is there in the first chapter of the first book, present before the world existed.

### **The Shape of Salvation**

Fast-forward to Acts chapter 2. The Spirit has just been poured out at Pentecost, and Peter stands up to preach the first Christian sermon. Listen to the shape of it. Peter declares that Jesus of Nazareth, attested by God with mighty works and wonders, was delivered up, crucified, and killed. Dead and buried. But God raised Him up, because it was not possible for death to hold Him. The Father raised the Son. Then Peter quotes Psalm 16: the Lord would not abandon His Holy One to see corruption. Then the ascension: this Jesus was exalted to the right hand of God. He ascended. He reigns now, seated at the right hand of the Father, with all authority in heaven and on earth. And having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured out the Spirit, which is what the crowd is now seeing and hearing.

There is the Trinity. The Son crucified. The Father raising Him. The Son ascended and reigning. The Spirit poured out. Peter's sermon does not argue for the Trinity; it simply describes what has happened, and what has happened has the shape of the Trinity. Salvation is not the work of one actor on a stage. It is the work of the Father who sent, the Son who came and died and rose and ascended and will return, and the Spirit who is given to everyone who calls on the name of the Lord.

Peter concludes with this: "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." Lord. The Greek word is Kyrios, the same word the Greek Old Testament uses to translate the name of God, the name so holy that Israel would not speak it aloud. Peter is saying: Jesus is Lord, which means Jesus is God. Athanasius was not inventing anything at Nicaea. He was defending what Peter said on Pentecost.

### **The Name**

And now we come to Matthew 28. The risen Christ stands before His disciples on a mountain in Galilee, and He gives them the commission that sends the church into all

the world. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

Notice that word: name. Not names, plural. Name, singular. One name, three persons. The Father is not the Son. The Son is not the Spirit. The Spirit is not the Father. Three distinct persons. And yet one name, because there is one God. This is not a formula that the church invented to organize her theology. These are the words of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen and standing before His disciples, telling them: this is the name into which all believers will be baptized. This is the name in which all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. This is the name of the God who made you, redeemed you, and now sends you.

There is no more concentrated statement of Trinitarian doctrine anywhere in Scripture than this verse. Matthew 28:19 is the reason Athanasius would not yield. He knew that "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" is where every Christian stands. It is the water we were baptized into. It is the address of our salvation. Change the name, and you have changed the God. Change the God, and you have lost the gospel.

### **What Happens When You Get It Wrong**

This is precisely what has happened in every teaching that departs from the Trinity. The Jehovah's Witnesses, following the ancient error of Arius almost exactly, teach that Jesus is a created being, the archangel Michael in human form, exalted above all creatures but not truly God. The consequence is that their Jesus cannot truly save. He is a superior mediator, a model of faithfulness, but not the Lord who bears the full weight of divine wrath and forgiveness on the cross. Their cross accomplishes what any heroic death accomplishes: an example. Nothing more.

The Latter-day Saints teach that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three separate gods, distinct divine beings among many. This is not the Trinity of Scripture; it is a kind of polytheism dressed in Christian language. If Jesus is one God and the Father is a different God, then Jesus is not the Son of the Father in any Scriptural sense, and the entire architecture of redemption, the Son sent by the Father, the Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son, the eternal intercession of Christ at the Father's right hand, collapses entirely.

And then there is the vaguer, softer error that fills much of the spiritual landscape today: the appeal to "the universe." You hear it everywhere, in popular meditation practices, in the language of manifestation and spiritual energy, in the idea that there is some divine

force or cosmic power that guides us and responds to our inner state. This is not the God of the Bible. The God of Genesis 1 is not a force. He speaks. He creates. He names. He rests. He is personal. The God of Acts 2 is not a cosmic energy; He is the Father who raised His Son from the dead. The God of Matthew 28 is not the universe; He is the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, who has a name, who calls you by name in the waters of baptism, who has claimed you as His own.

"The universe" cannot love you. "The universe" cannot forgive you. "The universe" did not send its Son to die for you. "The universe" was not raised on the third day. The reason Trinitarian theology matters on Monday morning is that it is the difference between a personal God who acts and a vague force that merely responds. It is the difference between a God who saves and a god who merely inspires.

### **Athanasius, and You**

When Athanasius was finally restored to his see after his fifth exile, having spent roughly seventeen years away from Alexandria over the course of his life, the Arian controversy was not over, but it was broken. He had simply outlasted it. He had refused every compromise, survived every exile, and remained standing when the emperors and the councils that had opposed him were gone.

He was not standing on stubbornness. He was standing on the same ground Peter stood on at Pentecost. He was standing on the same ground the disciples stood on when the risen Christ commissioned them on that mountain in Galilee. He was standing on the conviction that the God who hovered over the deep in Genesis 1, who raised Jesus from the dead in Acts 2, who speaks in Matthew 28 with all authority in heaven and on earth, is not an abstraction or a committee decision. He is the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. One God. Three persons. The name into which you were baptized.

Your baptism is your answer to every false teaching about God. When someone tells you that Jesus was just a great moral teacher, you reach back to your baptism. When someone invites you to center yourself in the energy of the universe, you reach back to your baptism. When someone says the Trinity doesn't matter, you reach back to your baptism. Because in your baptism, the Father claimed you, the Son redeemed you, and the Spirit was given to you. All three persons of the one God were present at the font, and all three persons remain present with you now.

This is not abstract theology. This is the most concrete, personal, saving truth in the Christian faith. God has a name. You know that name. You were baptized into that name.

And the one who bears that name, Jesus Christ, crucified for your sins, raised from the dead by the Father, ascended to the right hand of the Father where He reigns with all authority, and who is coming again to make all things new, that one has claimed you as His own.

Athanasius stood against the world because he knew what was at stake. He knew that the name on your baptismal certificate is the name that determines everything. And so he held the line, exile by exile, year by year, until the truth stood on its own.

You stand on the same ground he stood on. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

That is no small thing.

**Amen.**

Pastor Ron Breight

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