

**Complicated, Comprehensive**  
**Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17**  
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When I teach the book of John to the youth, we play a little game. At the beginning of each session, I ask them to tell me one thing from each chapter of John that we've discussed so far. So I'll say "John 1," and they'll respond "Prologue;" I'll move onto John 2 and they'll say "water into wine," and we'll keep going until we've hit every chapter. It's a simple way to help the group keep things straight throughout the book, remembering not only the things we've talked about but also the order in which they appear, which seems perhaps more important in John than in any other gospel because things are so carefully laid out in such a meaningful, escalating progression.

It's also a fun game: the youth seem to like trying to complete the challenge, which gets harder each week as we add more chapters, and they like working together. Some students will memorize just one chapter: there are youth here who can tell you that John 7 includes something called the "festival of booths," and that's all they can tell you about the entire gospel. Occasionally, one of the quieter students will prove to be incredibly good at this kind of memorization and have a moment in the spotlight...however it works, the youth enjoy learning John this way.

I suspect that most people, when they think about the third chapter of John, think about John 3:16. It's probably the best-known verse in the entire Bible: the most quoted, the one that shows up on signs at football games, and the one that summarizes the message of the gospel succinctly for the most people. It's not what I think of, however, or what I would name if I were playing the game I played with the youth. For me, "John 3" means Nicodemus.

It's not that Nicodemus is a hugely important character in the gospel story, or even that he's really interesting or memorable like Zacchaeus or Pilate. He's not even as interesting as the main character of the fourth chapter of John, the woman at the well. In fact, let's take a minute and look at her, because that's a story that is really striking, possibly my favorite in the entire gospel of John.

In the scripture, the woman never gets a name. She is an outsider in every way—she's female, a Samaritan, and an adulterer. She seems almost bothered by Jesus—he approaches her and initiates conversation with her, and she is reluctant to engage him. They interact in a bizarre setting, a well in the middle of the wilderness. That's fitting, because their conversation is equally bizarre, with confusing metaphors and convoluted exchanges. If abstruse lines about "living water" and revelations that come across as psychic tricks weren't bizarre enough, Jesus concludes by telling her that he is the Son of God...and she runs off excitedly and repeats this to anyone who will listen.

Now that's a story! You could almost make a short film about this whole exchange: outcast woman encounters a mysterious stranger who makes elaborate promises and reveals mysterious truths until the woman has a huge epiphany, her life forever changed. *That's* an interesting character.

That's not Nicodemus. He's a pious man, a Pharisee who would have been on the inside of any social ring, not an outcast. Where the woman at the well concluded by going to talk to everyone who would listen, Nicodemus seems quieter. He approaches Jesus, not the other way around, and he comes under the cover of darkness, secretly. When their conversation finishes, it is unclear what Jesus wants Nicodemus to know about him...and it is unclear what Nicodemus believes. Nicodemus does not depart a converted man.

This is why I like Nicodemus, and why I think of him immediately when I hear “John 3:” his path to Jesus is long, without Damascus Road moments, without trumpets sounding and the heavens parting, without dramatic revelations. We may convince ourselves that John 3:16 is the whole story...but when it comes to Nicodemus, John 3 is nowhere near the whole story. It’s just the beginning.

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One thing that John 3 and 4 have in common is that the words of Jesus are confusing throughout, both for the person listening and for us as readers. Jesus seems particularly to confuse Nicodemus with the phrase “born again” or “born anew” or “born from above,” depending on your translation. “Born again” sounds pretty common to us now, but since Nicodemus didn’t grow up in the Bible belt in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, he’s trying to understand Jesus’ words literally, and he’s understandably lost.

We, too, become lost...because we tend to assume that these verses are focused on our salvation. We parrot John 3:16 as a stripped-down understanding of how to get to heaven. We use the phrase “born again” to express our own moments of spiritual transformation. If we aren’t careful, John 3 has the potential to become a passage primarily about humanity’s salvation...but it’s not.

Nicodemus does not come to Jesus to learn about salvation. He comes to learn about Jesus. He approaches Jesus and labels Jesus as a great teacher, all the while intuiting that Jesus is more than this and hungry for a deeper, truer understanding of the mysterious man who greets him in the shadows. This is a passage primarily about Jesus: about who Jesus is and why Jesus is here. Jesus therefore caps this conversation by talking about himself, clarifying that he is here not to condemn but to save, to be a light shining in the darkness...although that, too, is more complicated than I could clarify in a single sentence.

In fact, “complicated” seems to be the theme of this morning’s scriptures. Paul’s words in Romans are equally paradoxical: just as Jesus has spoken rapidly and twistedly about condemnation & salvation and about darkness & light, Paul now writes with similar...“eloquence” about flesh and Spirit. Paul, never one to use words economically, gets especially wound up in his description of the Holy Spirit. I would argue that he uses more words when he’s trying to make an especially critical point, which I’m fine with...except that, in this case, it becomes a little tricky to figure out exactly what that especially critical point is.

Likewise, in the first reading from today, we encounter a God who is ethereal and dreamlike. The description paints an image of God sitting on a throne surrounded by winged creatures with smoke billowing all around. The prophet, responding to this vision, goes through feelings of inspired awe, lamenting inadequacy, and courageous volunteerism, all in about eight verses. His roller coaster of a reaction is much like ours: we encounter this God, even in print, and have no idea how to react. It is all a little overwhelming.

If you’re thoroughly lost and confused at this point, then let me offer this: it’s not your fault. And I’m going to go ahead and claim that it’s not my fault, either. Whoever put this lectionary together had no business giving us three readings that shift gears as quickly as these three do, three readings full of weird imagery and unclear directives and fast-changing emotive states. Every single commentary that I looked at while preparing for today described these passages as “complex” or “puzzling” or “intricate,” and those were the ones being kind in their description. I was hugely tempted to take just one of these passages—or even part of one—and ignore the rest...but even doing that led me into thornier territory than Br’er Rabbit.

My experience with scripture has been this: when a passage doesn’t make sense by itself, maybe it will make sense when it’s examined in light of everything surrounding it. In this case, that meant looking at these three passages not only in the context of the surrounding texts but also in the context that they provide for each other.

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Today, according to church tradition, is Trinity Sunday. That means it's the day when we focus on this concept of Trinity, one that is also mysterious, complex, and puzzling, and one for which there is not a clear or compelling explanation. I do a lesson with the youth where I try to explain the various interpretations of the Trinity—we talk about all kinds of images and metaphors that people use, about various theories that have been proposed, and about how many of those theories have been deemed heresy by future generations. The final answer that we land on apparently leaves them questioning, because I usually get the question “How does the Trinity work?” every year or so. (I tell myself that I get this question repeatedly because it's so complicated, not because you youths aren't paying attention or because I'm a bad teacher.)

When it comes to the Trinity, maybe “How?” isn't even quite the right question. Maybe the right question is “Why?”

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Today's scripture readings, naturally, point us to the Trinity. The Isaiah passage is a description of God the Father, emphasizing the majesty, glory, and power of a Creator-God. The throne that appears in this scripture is not accidental, nor is the fact that angels hover at this God's feet. If we take away anything from this depiction of God, it is that God is intimidating and powerful, a God that causes us to bow humbly and quiver with fear and anticipation.

The problem is that this God is extremely hard to relate to, and I believe that God desperately desires to relate to us. From the beginning of Genesis throughout the New Testament, God is seeking ways of encountering humanity, understanding humanity, and sharing with humanity. We're the ones who pull away and who remain unconvinced. Jesus seems to come at least in part because his coming allows for a truer relationship between God and humanity. Jesus comes in human form because we understand and identify with that form better. Nowhere is this more evident than in the two conversations in John 3 and John 4: the woman at the well understands Jesus in a way that she could never understand God before. Nicodemus, for all of his uncertainty, is bold enough to approach Jesus and converse with him, something he has not been able to initiate with God before. The conversations in John portray Jesus as God accessible, not God intimidating.

The problem with both God as Creator and God as Redeemer is that they both seem so finite, and our God is infinite. Whether we go with an image of God on a throne in heaven or God as human 2000 years ago, we're left asking—pleading—“where is God, with me, NOW?”

The conversations of John 3 & 4, in addition to describing Jesus, also point us to the Holy Spirit, a Spirit that is God lingering with us beyond our intense and holy moments. God remains with Nicodemus and the woman at the well after they're done talking with Jesus. They go out into the world, representing God where they go. We are commanded to do the same, to let God's Spirit fill us and guide us. We are, in Paul's language, in debt to the Spirit...a Spirit that reminds us, among other things, that our God is infinite.

God is mighty, intimidating, powerful, unapproachable...and God is kind, gracious, humbled, and extremely approachable. God exists in our dreams and in our real world. God is our past, present, and future. God is our everything.

We need the Trinity if God is to be all of this to us.

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At least part of why God exists as three-in-one is this: that we might experience God as fully as possible, even if doing so leaves us confused and wanting more. If we encounter God and react differently—that is, if we feel that we have it all figured out or that our appetite is sated—then we are missing part of what God has in store for us.

When I hold these three passages in tension with one another, the immense and entangled nature of God is only one thing that jumps out at me. The other has more to do with who I am.

The Isaiah story is, clearly, a call story—that is, it's the story by which Isaiah comes to be a prophet. This passage ends with him accepting the call and saying, "Here I am, send me!" The Romans story is a different kind of call: it is about humanity's call to live in Christ's grace, "according to the Spirit and not to the flesh." If Isaiah is about an individual's sense of purpose, then Romans is about our communal purpose as followers of Christ.

And the passages in John, too, are about one's sense of call and purpose when it comes to Jesus. My guess is that the woman at the well story, with its moment of epiphany and drastic transformation, has more in common with most vocally shared testimonies. But Nicodemus resonates the most with me. He will show up twice more in John's gospel, once to defend Jesus to the Sanhedrin (albeit in a soft-spoken manner)...and then finally at the end of the gospel when he helps prepare Jesus' body for the tomb. His conversion takes most of the book of John...but it is a complete one.

If our God is comprehensive—as the Trinity allows—then our call is also comprehensive. God calls us in ways as diverse as a clandestine nighttime meeting and a midday conversation in the open; God calls us through sudden moments of revelation and lengthy times of processing; God calls us whether we are male or female, Jew or Gentile, insider or outsider, pious or irreverent. God wants to relate to us, no matter who we are.

I have a lot more in common with Nicodemus than with the woman at the well, as exciting as it is to claim a dramatic, transformative encounter with the holy.

So God calls us all...and God calls us to all things. God asks us to care about both heaven and Earth; God asks us to be both fearful and bold, both humble and assertive; God asks us to speak and to listen; God asks us to give and to allow others to give to us. God's call for us is comprehensive in nearly every way.

Perhaps most importantly, when I say that God's call is comprehensive, I mean this: God calls us to give all that we have and all that we are. Our response to God's call is not intended to be a half-hearted commitment.

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There was a man at a church I attended growing up who was one of the first people I was ever deeply and truly afraid of. I was a little kid, and he seemed huge to me—tall, broad shoulders, square jaw. He spoke in a booming, authoritative voice that commanded people everywhere he went...and he spoke with words that were direct, imposing, and frank. I lived under the impression that when he wanted something to happen, it happened, often simply because he spoke. I did not want to cross this man.

At Christmas, he would put on a Santa Claus suit and deliver fruit and candy to people around town. I believe this ministry began as a simple one and grew, eventually turning into an effort that consumed much of his December. Starting the weekend after Thanksgiving and continuing right up until Christmas Eve, he

would get in a van and drive around Forsyth County every night, delivering fruit buckets for three hours or so. His entire garage was filled with cartons of apples and oranges stacked high. I can only imagine what he spent on fruit, not to mention gas. He did this because he loved connecting with people. He loved it more than anything else in the world.

The person who barked orders on a construction site or made demands at a church conference was the same guy who gave generously from the heart and held children in his lap.

At his memorial service, the sanctuary at his church was filled with people from all walks of life, all ages, all parts of the county and surrounding areas. At the end of the service, as we were departing the sanctuary, the organist played “Santa Claus Is Coming To Town,” and while many had held it together throughout the service, that moment cause more than a few tears.

We went out into the world after that service on a sunny April afternoon humming the Christmas pop standard and carrying it with us. In ways too mysterious to explain, the melody allowed that man to continue to be present, to continue to speak to us, to continue to lead.

I know many, many people who are like this man was: stern but generous, demanding but compassionate, human and somehow more than human. I’m betting you know someone like this as well. Perhaps the amalgam is part of how we are made in God’s image.

If God made us this way, then we owe it to God to give back our complicated, comprehensive selves.

If we are capable of transcendence such as this, surely God is capable of even more.

If, when we live into this transcendence, we produce beauty and goodness of this nature, surely what our transcendent God creates is even more splendid and amazing...even if it is also comprehensively complicated.