

Isa. 6:1–8

Ps. 29

Rom. 8:12–17

John 3:1–17

Understanding a Holy Mystery

Goal for the Session

Adults will encounter the Triune God as love, offering, and presence and find ways to articulate their understanding of this holy mystery.

■ P R E P A R I N G F O R T H E S E S S I O N

Focus on John 3:1–17

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Paul L. Hammer

In the other three Gospels, love language is rather sparse. In the Gospel of John, love language occurs more than forty times. Its use in our text probably is the most familiar of all NT texts. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” God’s intention is never to condemn but to save, that is, to make life whole. Salvation language is health language, God’s health for all the world in all of life’s relationships. That love is ever constant, but never coercive. It is invitational and hopes for a response, to complete the circle of love and share in the interconnectedness of the creating, liberating, healing Holy Trinity.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Randall C. Zachman

Jesus goes on to teach Nicodemus more fully about the birth from above, which is based entirely on what God is doing in him. Even as Jesus comes from God and speaks what he knows of God, so Jesus is returning to God, but only by being lifted up on the cross. The birth from above will take place by faith in the death of the Son of Man, which is even more paradoxical than birth by the freely given wind of the Spirit. Faith receives eternal life from the death of the Son of Man, because in it is found the self-giving love of God for the world.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Emmanuel Y. Lartey

God’s desire in sending God’s Son is not condemnatory. Rather, it is redemptive. The whole mission and purpose of God in Christ is to rescue and recover humanity, from being deeply embedded in self-defeating pursuits in a physically absorbed life. God in Christ wishes to reclaim, rename, and reauthor the stories of our lives with a new life empowered by the grace of God and made manifest in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. All of this is accomplished by the creative love of God, the redemptive offering of Christ, and the empowering presence of the life-giving Spirit. And these Three are One.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Judith M. McDaniel

God searches for us to complete the revelation of God’s being. God searches for us to participate in God’s life. God’s seeking is not brought about by our circumstance, our worthiness, our sufficient understanding. Rather, that seeking derives from the anguish of God, God’s longing for the work of God’s hands. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world God created might be saved. So how might we live in that kingdom where life is reborn?

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

John 3:1–17

YOU WILL NEED

- newsprint or board
- marker
- copies of the Doxology
- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 1

For Responding

- option 1: copies of Resource Sheets 1 and 2, pens
- option 2: newsprint, marker, 2 sheets of poster board, pencils, colored markers or crayons
- option 3: index cards, pencils, circle templates, colored pens, Resource Sheet 1

The Sanhedrin was the “Supreme Court” of the ancient Jewish state. According to tradition, the Oral Torah was passed in a continuous line from Moses to the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin decided difficult cases and cases of capital punishment.
—www.jewfaq.org

Focus on Your Teaching

It seems everywhere we turn, the word *love* is in evidence. From movies to so-called romance novels to discussions of relationships, adults use and hear the word many times a day. We even profess to love our sports teams and snack foods. The kind of love that is self-giving and everlasting is harder to find. Even the kind of love that provides the glue to seal marriages and relationships with families and friends together can be ephemeral. In this session, adults have the opportunity to not only encounter this kind of love, but expand their understanding of the love freely offered in and through the mystery of the Triune God. What a welcome message!

Triune God, give me the insight to open spaces for encountering you in my teaching. Amen.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, print the phrase “God is love” on newsprint or a board. On a sheet of newsprint, draw a large circle, with the words “creative love,” “redemptive offering,” and “empowering presence” at equal intervals around the outside. For option 3 in Responding, make several circle templates of a size that will fit on the index card.

Welcome participants and any visitors.

Point out the words “God is love,” noting that it is a common saying sometimes found on bumper stickers or billboards. Form pairs and ask them come up with a one-sentence explanation of how God is love. Ask volunteers to read their sentences. Tell participants that today’s session will explore our understanding of the nature of God.

Acknowledge that today is Trinity Sunday. Invite the group to sing the Doxology together. Sit in silence for a few moments. Pray the following:

Be with us today, O God. Give us fresh new insights, and deepen our commitment to life in and with you. Amen.

EXPLORING

Invite participants to read John 3:1–17 aloud, taking turns reading a verse at a time. Ask adults to comment on this reading, naming questions they may have.

Point out that, like the “I Am” statements from previous sessions, the character of Nicodemus is found only in John’s Gospel. Give the additional information in the sidebars about Nicodemus and the Sanhedrin.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. Besides the focus scripture, he advocates in chapter 7:50–51 for not judging a person without first granting a hearing. In chapter 19:39, he assists in Jesus' burial.

Discuss Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus:

- ✧ What do you think shaped the assumptions Nicodemus brought to his conversation with Jesus?
- ✧ How did Nicodemus misunderstand what Jesus was saying?

Ask the group to reread verses 3–8. Ask:

- ✧ Where in these verses do you read the phrase “born again?” What phrase does Jesus use instead?

To shed light on verses 14–15, ask someone to read aloud Numbers 21:4–9. Discuss:

- ✧ What was the purpose of lifting up the bronze serpent in the wilderness? What does Jesus mean when he says the Son of Man must also be lifted up?

Distribute Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on John 3:1–17). Invite participants to silently read the “Where?” excerpt. Ask:

- ✧ What does the excerpt tell us about the self-giving love of God?

Invite the group to read John 3:16 aloud together. Say that often when people recite the verse in the singsong manner in which they were taught, the emphasis comes on the word *world*. Ask them to repeat it again, this time emphasizing the words *so loved*. Ask:

- ✧ How does changing the emphasis alter our perception of the verse?

Have a volunteer read John 3:17 aloud, and another to read aloud the “What?” excerpt. Discuss:

- ✧ The writer of the excerpt observes that salvation language is health language. What does this mean?
- ✧ What does John 3:16 say to you about salvation? When you read verse 17 along with it, what more does it communicate to you about redemption? About condemnation?

To move to Responding, ask the group to read the “So What?” excerpt silently. Call participants' attention to the posted circle graphic. Say that this graphic is one way to represent the Trinity. Invite participants to discuss:

- ✧ Why is the relationship of the Three in One a holy mystery?

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session.

- 1. Reflect on God's Redemptive Purpose** By reflecting on the experiences in their lives where God's redemptive power is needed, adults can put words to the holy mystery of the love, offering, and presence of the Three in One. Distribute pens, copies of Resource Sheet 1, and copies of Resource Sheet 2 (God's Redemptive Purpose). Invite someone to read aloud the “So What?” excerpt. Ask adults to reflect and write about their own lives as they answer the questions on the resource sheet, each based on one person of the Trinity, and then to write or draw their understanding of Trinity. Encourage adults to take the sheet home and to make their reflections a part of their prayer life.

**EASY
PREP**

- 2. Create Images** By transforming language into images, adults can articulate the holy mystery of the Trinity. Print and post the following from the excerpts:

God's love . . . "is invitational and hopes for a response, to complete the circle of love and share in the interconnectedness of the creating, liberating, healing Holy Trinity."

"All of this is accomplished by the creative love of God, the redemptive offering of Christ, and the empowering presence of the life-giving Spirit. And these Three are One."

Form two groups and assign one of these statements to each. Distribute poster board and art supplies. Ask them to create a visual representation of their statement using drawings, diagrams, symbols, or the words themselves. Ask each group to display their completed creation. Display the posters, along with the statements, where congregants can view them.

- 3. Pray to the Relational God** By focusing prayer on the interconnectedness of the creating, liberating, healing Holy Trinity, participants can both respond to and share in that holy mystery. Invite adults to silently reread the "What?" excerpt and to describe what it says about God's love. Suggest that they make a prayer card as a visual reminder of the circle of interconnected love that is the Trinity. Distribute index cards and invite adults to use the templates to draw a circle on the card. Around the perimeter of the circle, ask them to print the words *creating*, *liberating*, and *healing*. Inside the circle, they should print the word *love* or draw a heart. If they like, they can use colored pens to embellish the words and symbols. Suggest that they use the card as a prayer prompt, a reminder that God's love is invitational and hopes for a response. They might focus their prayers on a different aspect of the triune God each day.

CLOSING

Ask someone to read aloud the "Now What?" excerpt. Invite adults to reflect on the question posed at the end. Have the group read aloud John 3:16–17, emphasizing the words *so loved*. Pray:

Thank you for your creating, saving, empowering presence, today and always. Amen.

If you are using *Feasting on the Word*, Adult, Summer 2015, distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for June 7, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

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God's Redemptive Purpose

"Eternal life" is not just an extension of life. It is a spiritual, transformative quality of life that transcends this physical life.

1. What aspects of my life need to come alive through God's creative power?

2. What deeply embedded practices or habits in my life need Christ's redemptive power?

3. What old wounds from my past need to be renamed for the Spirit to work healing power?

Write or draw an image that expresses your understanding of the interconnectedness of the creating, redeeming, and healing Trinity.

