

Homily – Father Brad Neely
Holy Trinity Sunday: Cycle A
Peter and Paul, Nezperce: June 19, 2011
Ex 34:4b-6, 8-9; 2Cor 13: 11-13; Jn 3: 16-18

Image of Andrei Rublev’s “The Old Testament Trinity.”

This icon, painted sometime between 1411 and 1422, shows us the three visitors to Abraham and Sarah described in the 18th chapter of Genesis 18. Russian Orthodox tradition identifies the three visitors with the three persons of the Trinity. In Genesis, we hear:
“Yahweh appeared to [Abraham] at the Oak of Mamre while he was sitting by the entrance of the tent during the hottest part of the day. He looked up, and there he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them he ran from the entrance of the tent to meet them, and bowed to the ground. ‘My lord,’ he said, ‘I beg you, if I find favour with you, kindly do not pass your servant by. (6)-Abraham hastened to the tent to find Sarah. ‘Hurry’ he said, ‘knead three bushels of flour and make loaves. Then running to the cattle, Abraham took a fine and tender calf and gave it to the servant, who hurried to prepare it. Then taking cream, milk, and the calf he had prepared, he laid all before them, and they ate while he remained standing near them

*under the tree. (10)-Then his guest said, ‘I shall visit you again next year without fail, and your wife will then have a son.’ Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well on in years. . . . So Sarah laughed to herself, thinking, ‘Now. . . I am past the age of child-bearing, and my husband is an old man’ But Yahweh asked Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh and say, “Am I really going to have a child now that I am old?” **Is anything too wonderful for Yahweh? At the same time next year I shall visit you again, and Sarah will have a son.’”** [I think Abraham was about 99 yrs old at this time].*

The Trinity is mysterious. The Church has studied and contemplated this mystery in thought, words and in pictures throughout her history. The representation of the Trinity by Rublev has stood the test of time, representing the three mysterious visitors to Abraham and Sarah described in the Genesis account we just heard. The original, which is in rough condition, is currently in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. [That’s not Moscow, Idaho].

We have to remember that the majority of people, until recently in world history, did not have the opportunity for an education. Icons are another way of **visually** teaching someone about the faith---

such as stained glass windows depicted biblical scenes as the catalyst for discussion. The person who produced an icon was thought to have “written” it, rather than “painted” it.

The basic geometric form of Rublev’s composition is the **circle**, uniting the three figures in a flowing pattern. The circle is an ancient symbol of the Trinity itself, as the circle has *no beginning* and *no end*.

The three visitors are depicted as **angels**, signifying that they belong to heaven rather than to earth. Their **faces are essentially identical**, representing the **equality of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity**. Scholars identify the figures from left to right as --Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The angel on the left (**Father**) is wearing a **cloak** of an **nondescript hue**, pale pink with brown and blue-green highlights, symbolic of the impossibility of portraying God in visible form.

The Father’s pointing **hand gesture** has several possible meanings:

- * pointing to the meat in the dish,
- * pointing to the second figure (the Lamb of God)
- * pointing with the one finger signifying the first person of the trinity.

Above this Father is a **building**, symbolic of the Church and worship of God.

The angel in the center, the (**Son**) is wearing a dark reddish purple **tunic** and a dark blue **cloak**, which are the **customary garments**

for Christ in most icons. The **color** of the tunic, reddish purple, is **symbolic** both of Christ’s **human blood and His royal status**. The **blue** of the cloak signifies the mystery of **His divine nature**. Above the Son is a **tree**, thought to be the Oak of Mamre mentioned in the **Genesis account**. The tree is also **symbolic of Christ’s crucifixion**, for he was nailed to a cross, sometimes noted as “nailed to a tree.”

The angel on the right (**Holy Spirit**) is dressed in a **green cloak**, traditionally the **color of life and renewal**, and a **blue tunic of divine mystery**. Above the Holy Spirit is a **mountain**, **symbolic**, in iconography, of the **spiritual journey**, or **spiritual ascent toward salvation**.

On the table is a **dish** containing the **meat Abraham prepared for his guests**. It rests at the focus of the circular arrangement as a **symbol of the Holy Eucharist---** the continuing renewal of the Covenant between God and man. On the front of the table is a **small, rectangular hole**. This **symbolizes the "narrow door" to salvation** found in the 13th chapter of Luke.

In any consideration of God as Trinity, what we don't want to miss is that the three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are ONE God, in ONE divine **relationship**. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are "in relationship" with each other. The Father is **in** the Son, and the Son is **in** the Father, and they are **one** in Spirit.

Rublev, in depicting the Three Persons gathered around a table with a meal, gives us a humanly conceivable way to enter into the mystery of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in a relationship of Oneness.

Another item not to miss is this: we understand from the Tradition of the Church, and her Scriptures, that **we** are invited to share in the relationship shown in this icon--- the relationship of God in the divine union. God has invited us to this table. This is a gift in which we must exercise our human freedom to **accept**, and posture our lives accordingly.