

December 8, 2021 – Exodus 40:17-21, 34-38 & John 1:14-18

Around the year 220 A.D., a Roman pastor by the name of Sabellius got an idea. Maybe we were making the Trinity too hard. Maybe it was simpler and easier to understand than we had been making it. Maybe the Trinity was really just like... the sun.

After all, the sun is one object with three natures: it's round, it radiates heat, and it shines light. Maybe God is the same way. Sometimes he has the nature of the Father, sometimes the nature of the Son, and sometimes the nature of the Holy Spirit. One god, expressed in three different ways. Like a person wearing different masks at different times.

So in the Old Testament, God wore the mask of the Father. And in the Gospels, God wore the mask of the Son. And since Pentecost, God has worn the mask of the Holy Spirit. One God, three masks. Three natures.

Sounds good, right? Perfectly logical. Easy to understand. Easy to describe with analogies. Unfortunately, also completely wrong. Dead wrong. Utterly and completely unbiblical.

For this false teaching, Sabellius was excommunicated and condemned as a heretic. Sabellianism was vigorously opposed in the church. And it is one of the major heresies of the early church that gave rise to the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds.

And yet, it is still around today. It goes by a different name now. It's called modalism. And it is the official teaching of Oneness Pentecostals. And if you're thinking, "I wonder if we have any Oneness Pentecostals around here," the answer is about a quarter mile that way. Because Truth Tabernacle is a Oneness Pentecostal church.

1,800 years have gone by, but we're still repeating the same theological mistakes. But we as Lutherans may also share a sliver of blame for that as well. Because even though we affirm a right and Biblical understanding of the Trinity and deny Sabellianism and Modalism, that doesn't mean we actually demonstrate the Trinity in action as often as we could.

Last week's sermon was a good example of that. I used a term last week that many Lutherans have never heard: "the preincarnate Christ". The idea is that since we are not Sabellians – not Modalists – we believe that God the Son was living and active throughout the Old Testament. And we see him at work there.

He's not incarnate, of course. He hasn't taken on flesh and blood as the child of Mary. But he still exists back then. He's still co-equal, co-eternal, and of one substance with the Father and the Holy Spirit. And he shows up all over the Old Testament.

And if we actually talked about that fact, pointed out when the preincarnate Christ shows up in the Old Testament more often, then it would be utterly absurd to say that the Son didn't exist until Jesus was born and God chose to put on that mask. The whole thing would fall apart.

As I said, we talked about one example last week, with the burning bush. In which, the voice from the bush says that he is the Angel of the Lord. The Messenger of the Lord. The one delivering the Word of the Lord. And yet also the Lord himself. The Word of God who is also God. That's a perfect description of the Son. Of Jesus.

Today, we get another example. It's a little more obscure. One that we might have missed if not for St John. For it's John who really helps reveal this to us.

He writes: "*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*" It's one of the most well known passages of scripture. It's also... not a very precise translation. It's not wrong. It's just missing a lot of detail.

It's that word "dwelt". In English, 'to dwell' is a pretty vague term. It doesn't really tell you much about how you're dwelling. Where you're dwelling. In what way you are dwelling.

In Greek, it's more specific. And so that verse reads, "The Word became flesh and 'made his tent' among us." "The Word became flesh and 'encamped' among us." "The Word became flesh and 'tabernacled' among us." It's a very specific kind of dwelling. The dwelling of someone at a campsite in a tent. In a tabernacle.

And if this weren't a clear enough reference to the Old Testament for us, John reinforces it with about a dozen different references to Moses and the Exodus during the first three chapters of this Gospel. In fact, he does so just a few verses after this: *"For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."* You don't start talking about Moses and then throw out a reference to God dwelling in a tent unless you intend for your readers to start seriously thinking about the Tabernacle.

The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us, and we have seen his glory. When did God previously tabernacle with his people? When did they previously see his glory? Well, that's exactly what happened in our Old Testament Lesson.

The Israelite's leave Egypt, escape Pharaoh's army, cross the Red Sea, and find themselves in the wilderness of Sinai. And they have no idea where to go. I mean, I'm sure they knew they needed to go roughly east. But beyond that, they were lost.

Except that they weren't. They couldn't be. For God was with them. And right away, he appears to them in a pillar. A pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. And this pillar of cloud and fire goes before them. Leading them wherever God wants them to go.

Until they build this tabernacle. When that pillar of cloud and fire settles upon the tabernacle itself and fills the whole tent with the glory God. And as long as that cloud and fire was tabernacled among them, they stopped and stayed where they were were. And as soon as it lifted and started leading them forward again, they followed it. Until it stopped again.

God tabernacled with his people. That tent became his home among them. They were traveling and he traveled with them. They were in the wilderness and he was in the wilderness with them. And he never left them. Until he finally led them into the Promised Land.

That pillar of cloud and fire wasn't just God in a general sense. That pillar was Christ himself. The preincarnate Christ, come to do for his Old Testament people exactly what he would later do for his New Testament people in a much greater way.

For as John tells us, when the Word became flesh, he tabernacled among us once again. The pillar of cloud and fire that once led God's people once again appeared and settled into a tent. But it wasn't a tent of seacow hide, goatskin, and linen like the Old Testament tabernacle had been.

No, it was the tent of mortal flesh. Journeying among his people through the wilderness of a sinful world. Leading to a place they didn't know. Pointing the way to the Promised Land.

The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us and we have seen his glory. Not the glory of a cloud or the glory of fire. But the glory of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. The glory of Jesus transfigured before John's very eyes. The glory of John standing next to Mary, looking up at Jesus' crucified body on the cross. The glory of John running up in wonder to find an empty tomb and sitting inside a locked room as the resurrected Jesus stood before them.

John saw the glory of the Son, born of Mary in Bethlehem that he might tabernacle in human flesh and dwell among his people. Journey with us until we reached the Promised Land.

And what then? Well, John picks up that same language in his Revelation. He writes in chapter 21, *"Behold, the [tabernacle] of God is with man. He will [tabernacle] with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."*

The preincarnate Christ led his people to a good land flowing with milk and honey. A land promised to the descendants of Abraham by the flesh where they would dwell secure. The incarnate Christ leads his people to an even better land. A land where death itself is no more. A land promised to the descendants of Abraham by faith where we will dwell with him for all eternity.

Sabellius thought it was a good idea to make the Trinity easier to understand. Easier to describe. But in the process, he just made God so much smaller. The God of the Bible, Old and New Testaments, is a God greater than any we can conceive. For he – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, has been working to bring us to the Promised Land of our salvation for all eternity. Amen.