

**JOACHIM OF FLORIS AND THE AGE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**  
**Trinity Sunday**

(06/04/2023)

Scripture Lesson: Mark 1:1-8

*“I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”* (Mark 1:8)

*“We have passed through the age of God the Father, the revelation of God in Israel. We have also passed through the age of God the Son, the revelation of God in Christ Jesus and the church. We are now entering into the age of God the Holy Spirit, when people will discover God within themselves, and the church will fade away.”* (Joachim of Floris)

Today is Trinity Sunday. It is also known as The First Sunday after Pentecost. The liturgical color for today can be either white or green. We (actually I) have chosen green, the color of the Holy Spirit, the third so-called “person” of the Trinity, partially because I would like to hold up the close relationship between the Trinity and Pentecost, the celebration of the disciples’ transformative experience of the Holy Spirit.

Throughout the Easter season, we have focused on the disciples’ post-resurrection encounters with their risen Lord: by the tomb, in the Upper Room, on the road to Emmaus, and by the side of the Sea of Tiberius. We have talked about how the disciples needed to let go of Jesus in his human form that they might rediscover him as the Holy Spirit. We also talked about how important it is for us that we not only let go of the human form of loved ones who have died, but that we open our hearts that we might rediscover them within us and in the world.

Joachim of Floris is a medieval theologian whom I have previously referenced in sermons and also in study group. I find myself drawn to his teachings, especially his thoughts concerning the evolution of God or the evolution of our understanding and experience of God. The church, specifically the Roman Catholic church, does not share my enthusiasm.

Joachim lived from 1132 to 1202. As the abbot of a monastery in Italy, he carried on the monastic revival which had been championed by Bernard of Clairvaux. Dante, in the *Divine Comedy*, describes Joachim as “endowed with prophetic spirit,” and he places him in *Paradiso* next to the great Franciscan, Bonaventura. It is only within the last century, however, that Joachim’s works have been published, and the depth of his theological insight is yet to be fully appreciated.

In 1202, Joachim published an eschatological philosophy of history entitled *Treatise on the Four Gospels*. Eschatological means having to do with the “last days,” the predicted end of the world. If we read Joachim’s thesis as having to do with the literal end of the world, it

becomes just another misguided prophecy. I believe it is more enlightening when we understand it as having to do with the evolution of God in human consciousness.

Joachim's understanding of the scriptures came to him as a sudden insight one day while he was studying the Book of Revelation. "Suddenly," he says, "the eyes of my spirit were enlightened, and the fulfillment of this book and the harmony between the Old and the New Testaments was revealed to me." I like that expression, "*the eyes of my spirit were enlightened.*" The hidden truth given to him was that, just as the age of Moses had been replaced by that of Christ, so the age of Christ must give way to the age of the Holy Spirit.

Joachim believed that the history of humanity unfolds in three stages. The first is the age of God the Father; the second is the age of God the Son; the third is the age of God the Holy Spirit. The clerical or institutional church is a manifestation of and is limited to the age of God the Son. According to his calculations, the Bible foretells the end of the age of the church in the year 1260.

As we listen to his description of these stages, let us think of them not only historically, in terms of the evolution of the Judeo-Christian religion, but also spiritually, as ages or stages in our own understanding of God, in our own spiritual journey, in our continual discovery and rediscovery of God in our own lives.

Joachim says we have passed through the age of God the Father. This was the revelation of God as a masculine, patriarchal, law-giving deity. What was important during this age or stage of history was the nation of Israel, the people to whom God chose to reveal himself, and whom he called to be a "light to the nations." This age came to an end with the birth of Jesus.

The second age is the age of God the Son. This was the revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth, the one whom we believe to be an incarnation of the Christ, the Logos, the Word of God. This was an evolution in the revelation of God. The Law and the nation of Israel were no longer central to our understanding of God, for now we knew what God looked like in human form. The church came into being to preserve the teachings of Jesus and to proclaim his message, to witness to Jesus as the Christ. In this second age, the church was very important.

Joachim believed that the age in which he lived, the age of God the Son, was coming to an end. He predicted that when the age of God the Son comes to an end, and the revelation of God evolves into the third stage, the church will become increasingly unimportant or irrelevant.

Based on Joachim's calculations, the age of God the Son was to end in the year 1260. This date was to usher in the age of God the Holy Spirit, when people would discover God

within themselves and, according to Joachim, “the church would fade away.” The institutional church of his day, not surprisingly, found this teaching annoying!

Well, the year 1260 obviously came and went. The only events of note that I can find for that year was Kublai Khan’s becoming ruler of the Mongol Empire, and the dedication of the cathedral of Chartres, which I love. However, what if Joachim’s prediction was not literally true, but symbolically and spiritually true?

In the passage from John 16 that we have explored throughout this Easter season, Jesus tells his disciples he has to leave them, or the Holy Spirit will not come to them. He tells them that his time with them in human form, as Jesus of Nazareth, has to come to an end so that they can find him, discover him, experience him in a new way, as the Holy Spirit. He tells them the Holy Spirit will be present within them and within the church. He tells his disciples “It is to your advantage that I go.” Jesus intended his revelation of God to give way to or be superseded by the revelation of God in or as the Holy Spirit.

Joachim said that when we experience God as the Holy Spirit, when we experience God within us, we will no longer need the church. As I mentioned, quite understandably, the church of his day found that teaching annoying! If he were not such an important figure in the monastic movement, he probably would have been killed. It is believed that Joachim was an important influence on St. Francis of Assisi.

The church of Joachim’s day had set itself up as the gatekeeper, as the only way to Christ, and therefore the only way to God. If there were no way to God except through Christ, and if there were no way to Christ except through the sacraments and teachings of the church, then you would need to be a part of the church in order to be saved. There could be no salvation outside the church.

Let’s go back to the points that Joachim made. All of us would probably agree with Joachim’s first point, that a special revelation of God occurred in and through the nation of Israel. We would also agree with his second point, that this revelation and experience of God evolved in and through the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who brought us a New Testament, a New Covenant with God.

The church came into being to preserve and proclaim the gospel, the good news of our Lord, Jesus Christ. The problem is that it set itself up as the gatekeeper to God, the only way to God. Whereas the original gatekeeper was Israel, as expressed in 2 Kings 5:15, “there is no God in all the earth except in Israel,” this position was soon occupied by the church. One of the central teachings of the church was the doctrine, *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*, which means,

“There is no salvation outside the church.” This expression comes from the writings of Saint Cyprian of Carthage, a 3<sup>rd</sup> century Christian bishop.

I think Jesus wants us to think past our focus on the church. Just as he did with Mary and the disciples, he wants us to discover him as a living reality and presence in our lives. He tells us that the focus should be on discovering the Holy Spirit within ourselves, in the church, and in the world. If we can do this, our religious faith, and our understanding of ethical or moral issues can evolve in keeping with our times.

The Protestant reformers wanted to take the church out of the central spot of our relationship with God. They believed the Bible, not the church, should be our guide to understanding Christ and God. They believed the Bible should be printed in a language that common people could understand, and that we should be able to read the Bible on our own. Just as with Joachim three hundred years earlier, the church found this annoying! They didn't like losing the central spot in the process of salvation, losing the power that went with being the one and only way that people could get to God.

Joachim would probably accuse the Protestant reformers of making the same mistake as the Catholics. They put the Bible, the testimony of the early church, in the central position. Joachim, even though he lived three hundred years before the Protestant Reformation, took the reformation one step further. Joachim said that the Holy Spirit should be the center of our faith. This makes sense because we believe that the Holy Spirit gave rise to both the church and the Bible.

The Holy Spirit not only created the church; the Holy Spirit leads us to continually reform it, helping it be true to its calling, leading it back as often as it departs from the path, especially when it becomes an end in itself. The writings of scripture were not only inspired by the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit enables us to understand the true meaning of scripture, enables the teachings of the Bible to evolve and come alive to us in our time.

Joachim believed that God's revelation has evolved or unfolded in three stages which correspond to the three people of the trinity, that it has progressed from God the Father to God the Son to God the Holy Spirit. The experience of God has evolved from the experience of God as a tribal warrior God, the God of Israel, to the God of Jesus, to the God of the church, to the God whom we find within as the Holy Spirit. Where I think Joachim missed the boat was in the conclusion he drew about the church. Joachim believed that when we discover the Holy Spirit within us, when we discover our personal relationship with God, we will no longer need the church, and the church will fade away.

The church does not need to fade away; the church needs to redefine itself! It needs to stop thinking of itself as the gatekeeper to God and devote its resources to helping people develop their own personal relationship to God. The church should help us discover God and Jesus in our own life, help us to experience the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, our guide on the journey of life.

When we think of the implication of Joachim's teachings along these lines, we can see how important the church becomes. The church becomes like a school. We might be able to learn how to read and write, to do mathematics, to become an educated person without setting foot in a school, but it is unlikely that this would happen, at least for most of us. I also don't know why we would want to do it this way.

When we strengthen our church through the sharing of our gifts, we strengthen the work of the Holy Spirit in the church, in our own lives, and in the world. Let's prove Joachim wrong! We don't want his prediction to become a reality! We don't want our church to fade away! We want it to become even more strong and vital, to grow and evolve that it might continue to be a fitting container for the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives as individuals and as a Christian community.

As we share the bread and the cup with each other, let us think of the Sacrament of Holy Communion not as a gateway to God, but as an experience of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Let us experience our Lord's presence both within and among us, just as the disciples experienced his presence when he broke bread with them in Emmaus and by the side of the Sea of Tiberius.

If we can incarnate our Lord's presence as the Holy Spirit both within and among us, and then if we can incarnate his presence in the world, we will have grasped the heart of Joachim's teaching and the true meaning both of Pentecost and the Trinity.

Let us now partake.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
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June 4, 2023*

An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.