We’ve all had the experience of going to the movies and, before the main picture starts, we are given an audio-visual appetizer of movies that will soon be on the screens of our local theaters. Face it: they are commercials – more subtle than the ones that are playing when you arrive at your seat in the theater – but commercials nonetheless. They are there to entice us, to pique our interest, to plant the idea that we might spend more money at the movies to see the latest releases. Frankly, I like the preview, because it helps me with the first sorting. Very often the preview shows me just enough to form an opinion, that is my opinion, no matter malformed it might be. If the preview hooks me, I’ll want to see the movie. If the preview stinks, it’s money left in my pocket.

Wouldn’t it be lovely if life came with a few previews? Wouldn’t it be great if we could have a few video clips from various parts of our life that we could watch, gain a little information, and then make decisions based on a little previewed information? Wouldn’t it be great if we could just download some audio clips that would help guide our way? Come up with that technology and I’ll not only invest, but during stewardship season, I’ll come and make a personal call!

The sad truth is that, in life and in things that really matter, we rarely get a preview of coming attractions. We hardly ever get that little nugget of knowledge that empowers us to make better decisions that we would make without it. We hardly ever have enough forewarning and prescience to inform what we do or do not do.
In the reading from John’s gospel for today, Jesus is preparing the disciples for his departure. It’s the night before he is to die and Jesus is giving his friends the benefit of words intended to comfort and console. Yet, in that compassionate act, he is also giving them a preview of coming attractions.

The first preview is of a happening in just a few weeks. Jesus says, “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” (Jn. 14:26) John doesn’t have the story of Pentecost. That story is told by Luke in the second volume of his work, known to us as “Acts.” The Gospel of John has no story of people from all the world over hearing the good news of Jesus in their own language, no little tongues of fire hovering above the disciples’ heads, no sound of a rushing wind – none of what we’ve come to know as the Pentecost story.

All John gives us is an appearance by the risen Jesus on Easter evening, when he meets with the disciples, saying “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” (Jn. 20:21-22) That’s John’s version of Pentecost.

Here is a preview of the coming attraction of Pentecost. Just before our passage in John’s gospel Jesus says, “I will not leave you orphaned.” Though Jesus will no longer be physically present with the church, he will not leave them alone or leave them to their own devices. They will have an advocate, that is, “one who will stand with them and for them.” The Holy Spirit will bring Jesus’ words and actions into the present moment, setting them free from the frozenness of cold history.

The Holy Spirit will enable us to see, and hear, and live as Jesus did. The world sees common fisherfolk – Jesus sees disciples who will change the world. The world sees a conniving tax collector – Jesus sees one who will be completely changed before the day is over. The world sees powerless, unimportant, disregarded women – and Jesus sees the first messengers of the resurrection. The Holy Spirit will enable us to see, and hear, and live as Jesus did.

That’s a preview of Pentecost – coming soon to a faith community near you!

There’s another preview of a coming attraction in the text from the Gospel of John. It wouldn’t formally be recognized by the church for a few hundred years, but the beginning of it is right in there, if you look closely enough.

While the word “Trinity” appears nowhere in the Old or New Testaments, the beginning of the concept is at work in the pages of John’s gospel. “But the Advocate, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” (Jn. 14:26) Here is a glimpse into the emerging conception of God that came to be known as “Trinity” – God in three persons.
God is spoken of as “father” – a word that has nothing to do with gender or masculinity – but has everything to do with love, provision, and welcome. “Father” has nothing to do with gender and everything to do with relationship.

Jesus is clear that he and the Father are one – playing from the same sheet of music – dancing to the same tune. If we would know and experience the fullness of God, we can do that as we know and experience Jesus.

The Holy Spirit is the same one who sent Jesus as the Word made flesh and who reminds and refreshes us of that presence.

Just one week after we celebrate the Day of Pentecost, we celebrate Trinity Sunday – the only day in our liturgical calendar that is the celebration of an idea. And what an idea! We celebrate the mystery of the Triune God.

And here, in these few verses from John’s gospel, we have another preview of a coming attraction: the doctrine of the Trinity that will be codified at the Council of Nicea in 325 and become a central understanding of Christianity, and the occasion for our celebration on the Sunday after Pentecost.

Well, Fleming, that’s a nice theological bit and some history, you say, but what does any of that have to do with me? The simple truth it has everything to do with each of us and all of us. In this passage from John, we are reminded of two essential truths that make a difference each and every day.

First, we are not alone. God has not abandoned us to the wiles and weariness of this world. We’re back to my favorite word: Emmanuel – God is with us.

In joy – Emmanuel.
In sorrow – Emmanuel.
In the full bloom of health – Emmanuel.
In sickness – Emmanuel.
In success – Emmanuel.
In failure – Emmanuel.
In life – Emmanuel.
In death – Emmanuel.
God does not leave us or forsake us. God is with us – empowering us, guiding us, changing us, recreating us. God is with us – inviting us into partnership with God to make the world more of what God intended it to be. God is with us – standing up for those who stand alone, speaking for those whose voices are rarely heard, challenging injustice, and healing the deep wounds of the earth.

If you don’t think this passage from John has anything to do with you, think again.
The second lesson for the day might just be this: never overlook the power and importance of community. God exists in a community of three – a community so strong and intimate that the individual portions cannot be seen without seeing the whole. God exists in community and God’s people are to live their lives in community.

Should you need any evidence of this essential truth, look no further than the election campaign going on and on and on in our country today. The purpose – stated or unstated – is to divide the nation into tribes of voters who attack and demean and denigrate – wait for it – each other. Friendships are being strained to the point of breaking over which candidate is worthy of support or not. Families are being pulled apart over a difference of political opinion. Really? I’ll remind you of one of Mr. Twain’s statements: “If voting made any difference, they wouldn’t let us do it.”

Why are we so willing – or at least so easily fooled – into allowing community to be torn apart? Why are we so surprised that the world around us is such a mess, when we willingly participate in the destruction of one of the essential tenets on which the world was created by a gracious God – the tenet that we are all in this together and that we can live together, and learn together, and laugh together, and make the world better because we passed by?

The single most important thing we can do to improve the world and its people, is to stop living lives of rugged individualism and learn – or relearn – to live in the kind of community that is expressed in the old commandment: “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

John’s gospel offers us a preview of coming attractions. What will life be without Jesus physically present? You can imagine the worry and anxiety the first disciples felt.

But, the preview includes this good news: you’ll never have to worry about that. God is with us and, if you do it correctly, you’ll have each other. And with the presence and partnership of God – and with the presence and partnership of one another – we can do great things.

For now and evermore. Amen.