

“Mystery”

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June 16, 2019

Psalm 8

¹O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. ²Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger. ³When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; ⁴what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? ⁵Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. ⁶You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, ⁷all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, ⁸the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. ⁹O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Romans 5:1-5

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

John 16:12-15

¹²“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” ¹³When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Stephen King. Mystery authors write works of fiction which stir us to keep reading. Page-turners, we call them. Then there are the TV shows – *Lost*, *NCIS*, *The Twilight Zone*, even *Dallas* - remember “Who shot J.R.?” the phrase which kept people wondering what happened until the next season arrived. Then movies like *Rear Window*, *Gone Girl*, even *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* and *Clue*, based on the classic board game, where we spend the game gathering clues to help us figure out who committed the crime, where, and how. That’s the way mysteries work – we become armchair detectives, following with rapt attention the main characters as they attempt to figure out *whodunit*, as the classic genre is often called. In the end, there’s resolution, as we discover the answers we are seeking. It was *Colonel Mustard in the Conservatory with the Candlestick*.

Today is the day the church sets aside to reflect on the Holy Trinity, this ancient doctrine of the church which states that God is three-in-one. God is known to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or as Speaker, Word and Breath, or as Overflowing Font, Living Water, Flowing River. God is three and God is one. There are three persons of the God-head, yet only one God. $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$? How does this possibly make sense? Well, it’s a mystery of faith, so I suppose we should pick up our detective magnifying glass and follow the clues to the certain resolution, where all will be explained. Well, no. The Holy Trinity is not *that* kind of mystery. Theologian Justo Gonzalez once said, “Trinity is a mystery, not a puzzle. You try to solve a puzzle, you stand in awe before a mystery.” Trinity is *that* kind of mystery. Rudolf Otto called it the *mysterium tremendum*, or tremendous, awesome mystery. This is the kind of mystery which envelops us, not the kind of mystery which we stand apart from with a diagnostic eye.

Trinity is something we experience, rather than understand. There are many metaphors – Trinity is like a three-leaf clover, or maybe it’s like water – liquid, solid, and gas, or maybe it’s like

a man who is a son, father, and husband. Those metaphors for the Trinity are all flawed – none can truly represent the Trinity. We try and try to find a clear explanation, but we fail, because we are meant to *embrace the mystery* in God. The late theologian William Placher said, “Trying to make things clear is often a mistake in theology.” John Wesley said, “Bring me a worm that can comprehend a man, and then I will show you a man that can comprehend the Triune God.”

We use the language of the Trinity not as a way of explaining or comprehending God, for we can never understand God. We use the language of the Trinity as a way of describing the revelation of God that we have experienced. The idea of the Trinity is to recognize that we see God from three different angles. The divine being remains unchanged, though our viewing angle changes.

Trinity as a word dates to the early 3rd century and a church leader named Tertullian. He wrote of the *trinitas*, a Latin word made up of two words, *trinus*, meaning threefold, and *unitas*, meaning unity. Or, threefold unity. There’s an even earlier Greek word for the concept, *triás*, which dates to about the year 170, first known to be written by Theophilus of Antioch. Neither word is used in the text of the Bible, but the basis of the doctrine of the Trinity can be found. Our texts today speak of God in triune form, as Creator, Redeemer, and Guide.

In Psalm 8, we read of our God who is majestic, who has created the heavens, moons, and stars, and everything beneath them. This creative God made all of the natural beauty we see around us, and made us just a bit lower than God, creating us in God’s own image. O God, *how majestic is your name in all the earth*, the Psalmist writes. *The Message* paraphrase has part of this Psalm as “Nursing infants gurgle choruses about you; toddlers shout songs.” All of God’s creation

joins in the chorus, singing of the wonder of creation and how God made humans the crowning achievement of creation.

In Romans 5, Paul writes of “our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand.” In other words, Christ has redeemed us, freeing us from sin’s grip, so that we can stand before our holy God. Again from *The Message*, “because of our Master Jesus... We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that he has already thrown open his door to us. We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand—out in the wide open spaces of God’s grace and glory, standing tall and shouting our praise.” Jesus has set us free to live into the lives God created us to live.

In John 16, Jesus is soon to leave his earthly ministry. His disciples have walked the path with him, learning from him, absorbing his words and actions, yet they aren’t ready to be alone. None of us are. Jesus tells them that there are many more things he wishes to tell them, but they cannot bear them right then. Therefore, the spirit of God will come and will guide them – and us – into the truth. *The Message* has this beautiful image – “when the Friend comes, the Spirit of the Truth, he will take you by the hand and guide you into all the truth there is.” I love the image of the spirit taking us by the hand and guiding us into truth.

Creator, Redeemer, Guide. God in three persons, blessed Trinity. Divine Mystery. How are we to make sense of this? I don’t think we *are* to make sense of it. Contemporary Christian artist Phil Wickham sings in his song “Mystery,” “no eye has seen, No ear has heard, No heart could fully know, All of Your mystery.” God’s mystery is far beyond us, something we cannot understand. Is this a problem? I don’t think it is. An early leader of the denomination in which I was raised, Robert Donnell, wrote: “your understanding was never intended to be the standard of truth. There are many truths entirely above your comprehension. . . . a God existing in one person

is as incomprehensible as a God in three persons.” That line holds great truth. God is incomprehensible to us, in any form. The finite creation cannot understand the infinite creator.

We are not designed to understand God, but rather to experience God, and we experience God as three-in-one, not as three separate beings. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin quoted Gregory of Nazianzus, who wrote in the 4th century: “No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illumined by the Splendor of the Three; no sooner do I distinguish them than I am carried back to the One. ...When I contemplate the Three together, I see but one torch, and cannot divide or measure out the Undivided Light.”

The three are united always, inseparable. One of the images we have of this indivisible relationship is the idea of *perichoresis*. Perichoreis is a Greek word, and we can get at its meaning by looking at its parts. Peri, as in the first part of the word “perimeter.” It means “around.” Choresis, from which we get the first part of “choreography,” which is about dancing. So, the word means something like “Dancing Around.” The trinity can be envisioned as an eternal dance among Father, Son, and Spirit. The choreography is exquisite, with each intertwined with the others. The dance goes on and on, with the love of God spilling forth in creating, redeeming, and guiding. God dwells in community, and so do we.

The editor of *Presbyterian Outlook*, Rev. Jill Duffield, wrote that she had recently heard many high school graduation speeches, both from graduates and school officials. She noticed a marked difference between speeches from the two different types of people. Here’s part of what she wrote: “The younger pontificators talked about the need for each other, the importance of honoring all people, the inevitability of challenges that will not be surmountable alone. The adults relentlessly said: ‘Follow your passion, you have the power to do whatever you set your mind to doing.’ One quoted the television show ‘Friday Night Lights’ saying, ‘Clear eyes, full heart, can’t

lose.” The graduates did not follow the characteristic American individualism which tells us that we alone can do whatever we attempt. They recognized the need for community, the importance of mutual respect, the ways that we share each others’ joys and sorrows.¹

We are a community. One of the terms used for a church is a “community of faith.” In being such, we reflect the community found in the triune God. Our world is all-too-often a divisive place. People stake out positions and use those positions as ways of classifying others, of separating themselves from others. Race, gender, faith, politics, sexuality, occupation, sports teams, musical interests, the list goes on and on – we build barriers of difference, rather than bridges of commonality. God in three persons, blessed trinity, the divine dance, shows us the way we are to be in relationship with one another. So let’s put down our detective magnifying glass, and stop trying to investigate the mystery of God. Instead, let’s join the divine dance, where we together stand in awe before the majesty of God, as God’s love envelops all of us in holy mystery.

Amen

¹ <https://pres-outlook.org/2019/06/trinity-sunday-june-16-2019/>