

GOD IN 3D

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Psalm 8

As a preacher, I occasionally have what we call preaching nightmares. These are fairly common among my peers. They are not unlike those dreams where you have an exam that you have not studied for. Usually, it involves my being in the back of the church and unable for some reason to get to the pulpit. And as I'm struggling to get there I realize that I don't have the sermon which I have prepared and I can't remember what it was even about. And then, when I get to the pulpit, I may discover that I am missing some crucial articles of clothing.

I had a nightmare this week, but it wasn't a preaching nightmare. I dreamed that I was attending a Predators game at the Bridgestone Arena. This was one of the finals games for the Stanley Cup. In the dream, I am in the packed arena surrounded by thousands of screaming fans waving catfish when I realize that I am there not to watch the game but I am there to sing the national anthem. I'm not a singer and certainly not qualified to belt out the national anthem live on TV in front of the entire hockey loving world. Fortunately, in this dream, I am fully dressed and I do know the lyrics to the song. I'm escorted out to the center of the ice and handed a microphone. A spotlight focuses on me, the room goes dark, and a voice booms out over the PA system introducing me. Then the voice says, "Mr. Edington, you are a minister aren't you?" "Yes," I answer. "And you've attended school for this?" "Yes," I say. "Well, then before you sing the national anthem, we want you to help everyone understand something. We want you to explain for us the doctrine of the Trinity." And this is where I wake up screaming.

Ok. Honestly, I didn't have that dream. But it would be horrible.

On the church's calendar, today is Trinity Sunday—a day to examine and celebrate the doctrine of the Christian Trinity. On this day we like to *Holy, Holy, Holy. God in three persons, blessed trinity*. The Trinity, of course, is our understanding that God relates to us as father, son, and spirit. If you go looking through the Bible for a concise explanation of the Trinity, you will be disappointed. It is not there. There are passages that refer to father, son, and spirit such as 2 Corinthians where Paul closes the letter saying, *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you*, or Jesus' great commission in Matthew when he says, *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*. There are plenty of passages which refer to God as Father, or to the Son, or to the Spirit. In the Apostles' Creed we affirm our Trinitarian beliefs when we declare, *I believe in God, the Father Almighty... and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord... I believe in the Holy Spirit*.

The Bible itself does not teach about the Trinity. It would have been nice if someone like the apostle Paul had been considerate enough in one of his letters to address the topic. Imagine if we could open Galatians and read, “I have heard from my cohort Bubba that there is a confusion among you regarding the Trinity. Allow me to explain.” Similarly, never did Jesus offer a parable that begins, “The father, the son, and the ghost walk into a bar...”

But if he did, it might go like this: The father, the son, and the ghost walk into a bar. The bartender says, What can I get you?

The father says, I'll have a Maker's Mark.

The son says, just a glass of water. I'm on my way to a wedding.

The ghost says, I would have a beer, but it just goes right through me.

The early church struggled for centuries to develop an acceptable Trinitarian doctrine. They struggled with such questions as ‘Is God one God or three?’ ‘Does one part of the Trinity rule over the others? Is the father more important than the spirit?’

The idea of the Trinity is not so much a doctrine as it is simply a means to describe the many ways that we can relate to God. I think of the different ways that people can relate to me. My daughter relates to me as a father. My mother relates to me and her son. My wife relates to me as the guy who mows the grass. We all relate to different people in different ways. The better we know someone, the deeper the relationship.

From the time of Abraham, people of faith have recognized that God is not one-dimensional. A relationship with God can be and should be deep and multi-layered. The notion of the Trinity is one way that we can express this idea.

Our scripture selection today is from the psalms—Psalm 8. This is a psalm of praise to God the creator. It is an echo of the creation story in Genesis.

The psalm begins by praising God saying, *O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth.* The psalmist recognizes that all creation is God's handiwork—*When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established.* Then, the psalmist asks the most important question a person can ask, the question that establishes our place in the universe. The psalmist asks, *What are human beings that you are mindful of them?* In other words, given the glory of the cosmos that you, Lord, have created, who are we humans that you should care about us? That you should even notice us? Then the psalmist acknowledges that humans do have a place because that is God's intent. *You have made them a little lower than God.* That word God is the literal translation of the Hebrew word *elohim*. Many scholars prefer to translate that word as angels. In his day, the psalmist would have understood God to preside over a heavenly court of divine beings. Humans would rank just below the angels.

Furthermore, mortals have a divinely appointed purpose. They have been crowned with *glory and honor* and have been given dominion over all creation, including all creatures.

Psalm 8 is not a passage that will uncover for us the mystery of the Trinity. The psalmist reveals that human beings—mortals—or as he writes in Hebrew, ‘adam (which is the Adam of creation)—meaning women and men and children—have a special place in God's plan. We are not cattle but we are not angels either. We are just a little less than angels and we have been given dominion over God's creation.

Unfortunately, this notion of dominion has been used by some to justify the abuse of creation for profit. Some take the attitude that they can do what they want because God wills it. This is wrong. Dominion may mean mastery, but it also brings with it responsibility. I may own a car but that means I'm responsible for its maintenance, care, and upkeep. I can't buy a new car, immediately drive it into a tree, and then go back to the dealer and demand a new one because the old one broke. God gave us dominion. God did not say I've got another creation when you break this one. The theological word that works best here is stewardship. God has given us stewardship of creation. We are the managers, the caretakers.

So what does this have to do with the doctrine of the Trinity? Well, the answer is a little and a lot. It is not a Trinitarian passage, but it is a reminder that our relationship with God is complex.

Last summer, my wife and daughter and I were traveling by car through Pennsylvania and New York. In that area there are lots of toll roads. It seemed that every mile or so we were throwing quarters at someone. At each tollbooth we would stop, pay our toll, receive change if necessary, say thank you, and speed away. This transaction had to take place as quickly as possible or else we would hear horns of complaint. No chatting, asking about the grandkids, swapping recipes, or reviewing last night's Game of Thrones. As human interactions go, it is as flat and one-dimensional as possible.

Our God, on the other hand, is not a one-dimensional God. And does not desire to be. God wants to relate to us at every level—as creator, a savior, guide, friend, and so much more. In turn, we should not limit our relationships with God. God is open to us. We should be open to God. Many times, in our Prayer of Confession, we confess how we seek to hide from God. God does not want just a part of us; God wants all of us. God does not want to be a tollbooth operator where we just slow down for a moment so that we can throw our offering in the plate. God desires our heart, soul, strength, and mind—all of us, a three-dimensional relationship.

I want to finish with a story about a man named Walter Munk (MUNK). Walter Munk is a scientist. He is one of the world's premier oceanographers with a career that has lasted eight decades. He is frequently referred to as the “Einstein of the

oceans.”¹ Munk was born in 1917 and is approaching his 100th birthday. Three years ago, in 2014, Pope Francis convened a four-day workshop at the Vatican² focusing on the environment and ecology. Andrew Revkin was a science reporter for the New York Times covering the event. In a discussion over dinner at the Vatican, Revkin asked Mr. Munk what he thought the solution would be to our ecological issues and climate change. Revkin assumed that Munk would identify some great advancement such as fusion or geoengineering as our hope for the future. What he said surprised the reporter. Munk said, “It will take a miracle of love and selflessness.”³

The 8th psalm informs us that while we ourselves are not divine, we do have a divinely-appointed mission—the stewardship of creation. A one-dimensional approach to this mission would be through power. Power is always one-dimensional. Stewardship through love and selflessness is complex; it is three-dimensional. By approaching the earth’s problems this way we are shouting to the world, *O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth.*

¹ https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/25/science/walter-munk-einstein-of-the-oceans-at-97.html?_r=0

² Sustainable Humanity, Sustainable Nature: Our Responsibility

³ <https://dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/12/31/tracing-the-roots-of-pope-franciss-climate-plans-for-2015/>