

Trinity Sunday: Psalm 8
Church of the Good Shepherd
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Paradoxology

“Lord, our governor, how majestic is your name in all the world! . . . When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars you have set in their courses, what is man that you should be mindful of him; what the son of man that you pay attention to them? the son of man that you should seek him out?”

Have you ever felt that way? Standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon, or at the beach looking at the ocean, or just looking up at the sky on a clear summer night, you're apt to feel small before such majesty. “Billions and billions of stars.” Wasn't that how Carl Sagan used to put it? Billions and billions. But that doesn't come close to capturing the extent of it: we live on planet Earth, which is just shy of 8,000 miles wide, in what's known as the solar system. This small collection of planets, our cozy little neighborhood, is roughly 7.44 billion miles wide (from Pluto to the sun). The solar system exists in one arm of an average-sized spiral galaxy known as the Milky Way. Don't let this average size fool you, though. The Milky Way is still 100,000 light-years across. (Light-years are how far light can travel in a year—pretty far!) And we're not alone; the Milky Way is part of a larger body known as the Local Group, which is a grouping of fifty dwarf galaxies. The Local Group is part of the Laniakea Super Cluster, which includes hundreds of groups, and the Laniakea Super Cluster is one of millions of super clusters in the observable universe—the observable universe being 93 billion light-years across. Billions and billions, indeed! The universe, suffice it to say, is massive! In fact, the universe is so large, and is expanding at such a rapid rate, that even if humans could travel at the speed of light, we would never leave even the Local Group. All the other groups would be moving away from us so quickly that we would never catch up. It's easy to become overwhelmed by the sheer vastness of the universe. It's truly incomprehensible.

But then you start thinking about who made it, who made the universe, God, and our minds are liable to implode at the sheer unfathomability of it! God transcends all of that, is above it, beyond all of the galaxies, groups, clusters and the whole of the universe. If we are awed at the beauty and vastness of something as small as the Grand Canyon, how can we not just fall down stupefied at the thought of the Creator of the Cosmos? God is unimaginable, incomprehensible, a mystery to us.

I mean this not just in the immediate sense, as in God is unknown, but in a deeper sense too, a literal sense. You see, the Greek noun *mysterion* is related to the verb meaning “to close the eyes or mouth.” A mystery then is something that shuts you up, leaves you speechless. God is just such a mystery, for when we encounter Him, when we experience his glory and majesty, we are left with nothing to say. God is beyond comprehension, greater than we can understand, perceive, describe, or imagine. We are simply unable to wrap our brains around who God is, in His fullness.

But then again, if we could, I suppose he wouldn't be God. For a God who is comprehensible is not God. A God that we can claim to understand completely through the resources of our own mind is by necessity lesser than us, and thus an idol, fashioned in our own image, not the true and living God of Scripture.

This means that God is not our best friend, our secret lover or our good-luck charm. He is God. God's being God means that He is not answerable to us or to anybody. He does sometimes explain things to us, but He does not have to and often He doesn't. His ways are not our ways. To live with the Creator of the universe means that we conduct our lives with a God who does not explain himself to us. It means that we worship a God who is often mysterious – too mysterious to fit our formulas for “better living.”

It's no wonder then that people today aren't all that interested in God. Our age dislikes intensely the idea of mystery because it exposes our limitations. The thought that there could be something, or someone, beyond our comprehension or imagining is, of course, exciting...but it is also humbling. Speaking on preparing for ministry, the Catholic mystic Henri Nouwen observed: “This is very difficult to accept for people whose whole attitude is toward mastering and controlling the world. We all want to be educated so that we can be in control of the situation and make things work according to our own need. But education to ministry is an education not to master God but to be mastered by God.” Thus the mystery of God puts us in our place, and that place is not at the center. God is not so much the object of our knowledge as the cause of our wonder. St. Gregory of Nyssa, quoting today's psalm states: “God's name is not known; it is to be wondered at.” God is indeed a mystery, *the mystery*.

So, looking at the night sky ought to make us ponder, not just God's majesty, but also why God would pay attention to us at all, let alone desire to make Himself known to us, to condescend to our level, our mental ability, that we might know Him. For, while God is a mystery, mystery is not God's proper name. Transcendence is not God's only way of being. God has chosen to make himself known to us, to give us his name, not once, but multiple times. At the burning bush, God reveals himself as Yahweh, “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be.” In case that wasn't clear, God identifies himself to Moses as ‘The Lord, the God of your ancestors--the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.’ God is beyond all words; yet God has attached himself, his name to human names: He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Two millennia later, God reveals himself in a different way in the Incarnation, God revealed in the face of the man named Jesus. And through him, through his teachings, we come to know God by a wholly different name—as Father, Son and Holy Spirit—as Trinity, as a unity of three Persons sharing the same divine nature.

Now, if you're at all familiar with the Church's teaching on the Trinity, you're probably thinking that the whole idea was thought up by some ivory-tower theologians who, typically, were making things more complicated than they needed to be and were obscuring the simple faith of regular believers with this convoluted notion—three persons but one God. But in fact, it seems that the process worked pretty much the other way around. Practicing believers and worshipers were driven *by their experiences of God* to the awareness that God related in several different ways to the creation. What these believers came to insist upon was that God had to be recognized

as being in different forms of relationship with us, in ways at least like different persons, and that all these ways were divine, that is, were of God. Yet there could not be three gods. God, to be the biblical God and the only God of all, had to be one God. This complex and profound affirmation was then handed over to the theologians to try and make it more intelligible. And they have been trying to do so ever since.

Indeed, theologians throughout the centuries have found the Trinity a pretty rich seam to mine. Saint Patrick is said to have explained the Trinity to the Irish by using a shamrock, three individual leaves, yet still one plant. Augustine of Hippo said the Trinity was best understood as the Lover, the Beloved, and the Love which exists between them. The Cappadocian Saints (Basil, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus) thought of the Trinity as a dance of three persons, moving together in a circle. The metaphor I like the best is that the Trinity is like three torches in which the fire of the first passes to the second and then is relayed to the third, until they are all burning in one blaze of holy fire—three torches, one fire.

Yet all these metaphors break down in the end. That's why Christian thinkers have always said that if we tried to grasp the Trinity, we would be "frenzy-stricken for prying into the mystery of God." Augustine once told his students who studied the doctrine of the Trinity, "Lest you become discouraged, know that when you love, you know more about who God is than you could ever know with your intellect." The author of the book, the Cloud of Unknowing, said something similar, "[God] may well be loved, but not thought. By love can he be caught and held, but by thinking never." As these two attest, the Trinity is beyond rational thinking. But that doesn't mean it's irrational. We can't fully understand the concept of the Trinity. But that doesn't make it nonsensical.

Indeed, saying that God is Trinity gives us some boundaries for how to think of God. It means that we mustn't think of God as like a pizza cut into three slices. Nor that God is like the three parts of an egg. Or that God has three modes or three disguises—it is not that God puts on the "Father hat" and creates the world, and God puts on a "Jesus hat" and goes out to save the world, and then God puts on "a Holy Spirit hat".... No, they truly are three in one. When you meet the Father, you meet Jesus and the Spirit. And when you meet the Spirit, you meet Jesus and the Father too.

To be sure, that God is three persons, yet one God is paradoxical, beyond words and logic. But it's not that Trinitarian theology is too complicated to understand; it's that in the end the *Trinitarian God* is too complex to be managed or manipulated by any of us who think we know better than God.

It seems to me then that, rather than explaining how three things are really one thing, we must try to do what the doctrine of the Trinity was originally formulated to do: to give words to the faith, to acknowledge the truth of God and so praise God more truly. Indeed, I think this is what Trinity Sunday is supposed to be about. Its purpose is not to give you an opportunity to watch the preacher squirm for 15-20 minutes while they try to make sense of a grand theological paradox; it is to acknowledge that paradox and give thanks that God has seen fit to reveal himself so. In fact, when we come together each Sunday it is to engage in what I like to call "paradoxology."

Paradox, of course for the mystery of God, and doxology, meaning praise, worship. We come together to worship the mystery of God—paradoxology!

So, this means that as we go into the world to witness to God, we do so not with an attitude that we have it all figured out. We have to remember what it is we are witnessing to. As Bp. Kallistos Ware reminds us, “It is not the task of Christianity to provide easy answers to every question, but to make us progressively aware of a mystery.” I love that! It is not the task of Christians to have all the answers but instead to kindle an awareness of a mystery, to witness to the mystery of God.

I am encouraged in this by Kirk Hadaway and David Roozen, two sociologists of religion. In their book *Rerouting Mainstream Protestantism*, they argue that mainstream Protestants like ourselves do ourselves a great disservice when we neglect the importance of mystery. They assert that one of the most important things mainline Protestants must do is worship God. If we strike the world as nothing more than a sanctified form of Rotary, then we deserve the doom we will get. This is not a knock against rotary. They do good work. Rather, it is an acknowledgement that, yes, it is good to feed the poor, but people hunger to know a people who know mystery, who dare to explore the transcendent, who risk worship of the living God. That is where *we* come in. We are people who know something of mystery, who do not retreat from uncertainty, who risk befriending and loving an incomprehensible God. That is our gift, what we offer the world. So when we speak the name of God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit— we do so with confidence but not arrogance, grateful to tell others of the God we worship. Thanks be to God!