

GOD IN THREE

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Psalm 8

As a preacher, I occasionally have what we call preaching nightmares. From my conversations with my peers, I know that there are fairly common. They are not unlike those dreams where you have an exam that you have not studied for. Usually, my preaching nightmares involve 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.

My most recent nightmare was not a preaching nightmare, per se. But it was close. I dreamed that I was at the Wilson County Fair. In in the big arean and it is awards night. The place is packed. All of Wilson County is there. My job that night is to deliver the invocation. Fortunately, in this dream, I am fully dressed and I have my prayer printed out and in my pocket. All is good. I'm escorted out to the center of the arena 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 deliver the invocation, we want you to help everyone understand something. We want you to explain for us the doctrine of the Trinity." And 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.

The Trinity, of course, is our understanding that God relates to us as father, as son, and as 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 his letter with this blessing, *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.* Or there is Jesus' great commission in Matthew when he states, *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.* In addition, there are plenty of passages in the Bible 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.* We find similar words in the Nicene Creed.

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 Timoty 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...” It’s just not there.

The early church struggled for centuries to develop a doctrine of the Trinity that was acceptable to all. 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 act on this idea.

Our scripture selection today is from the psalms—Psalm 8. This psalm is not a Trinitarian psalm. But it come close as it 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.

Our God is not a one-dimensional God. And does not desire to be. God wants to relate to us at every level—as creator, as 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 desires our heart, soul, strength, and mind—all of us, a three-dimensional relationship.

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. Through power, we can bulldoze the earth to our own will. On the other hand, 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.*