



“God: They/He/She”

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“God: They/He/She” | Romans 5:1-5 | Pastor Jess Scholten

Ah, the Trinity. It's right there in Scripture, but elusive, nonetheless. It's Trinity Sunday on the Church calendar – a day we purposefully reflect on what it means to have the very unique doctrine of a God who is Three in One. Three distinct persons but one God. God in Community. God who connects to humanity in a multitude of ways.

When I was in seminary, at the end of every year, we had oral and written exams through our local district – in the Presbyterian church we call those Presbyteries – in the denomination in which I was originally ordained, they were called Classes – a Dutch word, which means a fleet of ships moving in the same direction. And at the May meeting every year were so many of these exams – in small rooms, in large sanctuaries, Greek, Hebrew, practical ministry, theology.

These exams were terrifying, especially since my seminary was in the same town in which I lived. And really especially after our senior year in seminary, because those were before the entire gathering body, not just a small group of people – over a hundred professors, pastors, and elders. And most especially, because there was one particularly ornery man, God rest his soul, who loved to call students heretics based on their answers.

We witnessed each year as the exams opened to questions from the floor as this particular person would ask the question – give me an example of the Trinity – the understanding of God as God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Students tried all sorts of tactics: a three-on-three basketball team; a man who was a father, a husband, and a son; H₂O as ice, water, and steam – of the same substance but different forms. Each time, the questioner's response was the same: “Heretic!” he would loudly grumble and then name the theological concept that paired with the heresy: You're a modalist, as if God is one person simply acting in different ways; you're a Tritheist – you don't even think God is one but give a definition of three distinct gods; you're a Unitarian who doesn't recognize the distinction of the three persons of the Trinity. Don't even get me started on Arianism, Sabellianism, or Subordinationism. Seriously, don't. I already had to deep breathe for a few minutes flashing back to all of this at my desk earlier this week.

I was so caught up as a student thinking about that man's gravelly accusations and the weird fear it struck in our hearts for our senior theology exams that I think I forgot his whole point, which is that you can't really define the Trinity in a human concept, because describing God – the Great Three in One – is a mystery.

A God who loved human beings is already a God who works against most the ancient

understandings of a god. Most ancient gods were divine beings who needed sacrifice to be satisfied or thought of humans as their own little playthings. A God who purposefully and carefully created us? That was something new. A God who literally breathed life into creation and interacted in thoughtful and loving ways with people? Who was this God who called to a human out of the burning bush so that Moses would care for others? Unheard of. A God who was sculptor, word, and wind – a God who was a pillar of light and the sound of sheer silence, a God who loves us so much that to be as close to us as possible became **human** – not even jumping into a fully grown, strong human, but showing up as a tiny baby. Our God is mind-blowingly mysterious.

Flashback with me almost twenty years to 2007 – a self-published book by William P. Young who tells the story of Mack, a man whose youngest daughter was presumed murdered, but her body never found. During what Mack calls his *Great Sadness* in the years following her death, he visits an old cabin where there is evidence his daughter was abducted. You may know the story as, *slide* *the Shack*. They made it into a movie as well, but the book lights up our imaginations with a new understanding of the Trinity.

Mack falls asleep in the shack and wakes up in the same place... but in a very different setting – not winter, not desolate, but summer, with a vibrant garden and company. A jubilant Black woman greets him as does a 30-something Middle Eastern man. Mack stands there in wonder, reflecting on the impossibility of it as his brain tries to catch up with the information before him. ***Is he having a very unconventional experience of God?*** Just then a spry Asian woman introduces herself as, “Keeper of the gardens, among other things” (87).

When he asks the question that is beginning to form: so... “which one of you is God?” “I am,” said all three in unison.

What Mack experiences is what some who have gone through the fire of grief find – a living and meaningful experience of the Holy in a profound and deeply transforming way. As God, who Mack has previously called, Papa, explains: “Mackenzie, I am neither male nor female, even though both genders are derived from my nature. If I choose to appear to you as a man or a woman, it’s because I love you. For me to appear to you as a woman and suggest that you continue to call me Papa is simply to mix metaphors, to help you keep from falling so easily back into your religious conditioning.... To reveal myself to you as a very large, white grandfather figure with a flowing beard... would simply reinforce your religious stereotypes, and... that you can’t grasp the wonder of my nature is rather a good thing. Who wants to worship a God who can be fully comprehended, eh? Not much mystery in that” (93 and 101).

So maybe using a 3D-printing of a square tessellation puzzle that breaks into three pieces and then can, after a LOT of practice, be reconstructed... as a children’s message might still get me called a heretic in my senior theology exam. Not because it’s not a reasonable metaphor, but because it does the thing that we so often do with God: define. Categorize. Explain. Rationalize. Read about. Suiting God to our own purposes for power or recognition. When instead, often Scripture points to Divine Mystery, something to be **experienced** rather than

explained.

Our second passage from Scripture – our Old Testament lesson – comes from Proverbs, and the passage captures some of this mystery of the Trinity – it focuses on the Holy Spirit, which is often referred to as Wisdom in the Old Testament. Hear God’s poetry for the Church today from Proverbs, Chapter 8.

“Does not wisdom call and understanding raise her voice?
On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand;
beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals, she cries out:
‘To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all who live.’

“The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of acts of long ago.
Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.

Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth,
when God had not yet made earth and fields or the world’s first bits of soil.
When God stablished the heavens, I was there;
when the Lord drew a circle on the face of the deep,
when God made firm the skies above, when the Lord established the fountains of the deep,
when God assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
then I was beside God, like a master worker,
and I was daily God’s delight, playing before the Lord always,
playing in God’s inhabited world and delighting in the human race.”

Wisdom, the Holy Spirit part of the Trinity, was there from the beginning of time, standing at the crossroads. She is present as God makes the boundaries of creation, and She is a delight to God while She delights in us and all of creation. Too often, we only hear masculine pronouns for God – even God in the rest of that passage is only referred to as he, so I admittedly fidgeted with it a little.

And for good reason. It’s Father’s Day, and some of us have magnificent dads – they are or were patient and hilarious and full of wisdom, great story tellers or able to fix anything, mentors, teachers, and friends. But for some, their fathers are found to be lacking not just in small ways but in big ways of nurturing and care – abusive or absent or painfully narcissistic. A gender-neutral understanding of God that doesn’t have to fit into traditional understandings of language and boxes is a gift to those who have been harmed by only knowing God as the judgy Old Man.

My very favorite passage about God and gender is from the very beginning in Genesis. "Then God said, 'Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness.'" (Genesis 1:26a) God: the original They/Them. As Illustrated Ministry quipped on stickers last year: “God is genderful.”

And delighted in us. And doing everything They/He/She can to connect to us – to remind us of the value of community, and to whom we can connect in a meaningful, living relationship, so that we more fully know love and how to share that love with others. God: Divine Mystery.

Even Paul captures some of that mystery in the passage from Romans – the mystery that not only joy but even suffering can still bear fruit in us. Through faith and our knowledge of God's work in Jesus Christ, we have peace. We know God's overwhelming love for us. We don't have to spend our lives wrestling and working towards salvation – we are already beloved. We already belong to God. So **how** will we live that out?

When trials and challenges come our way, we stand firm, knowing that God is with us, God loves us, God comes to us as a loving Father, a mother hen gathering us under Her wings, a friend, grace embodied, fire, wind, and energy. And when those trials and challenges come, we can still stand firm, grounded and persevering, growing in the fruits of the spirit, and holding fast to hope. In what ever happens, we can remain lovingly attached to God and remain a loving presence to others. Why? Not because of the technicalities of faith – let's be real, Paul gets into the weeds sometimes in some of those New Testament letters. Not because of the knowledge of God's love or the details or some sort of certainty of faith, but because we have a bodily experience of God's love poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

This is Wisdom. This is the gift of God to be a living presence in and through us, come what may.

We don't have any shortages of trials and challenges these days, do we? Read our prayer list – new diagnoses of cancer, concerns over employment, emotional and physical needs, prayer requests for parents, children, grandchildren. There are so many people we care for – or even ourselves – in need. And that's before even turning on the news. Greater threat of global involvement in Israel Palestine – politicians murdered in their homes. It is heartbreaking and infuriating and, devastatingly, not even surprising with the kind of vengeance that is being stirred up, even by leaders – in country and churches.

But we serve a God of love, a God who calls us to lead differently – a God who embodies fierce grace and abundant love. We serve the Holy One who calls us to live out the mystery of love and doesn't just give us words for it but pours Themselves into us, so that we too can be love incarnate. Father, Son, Holy Spirit, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer – Parent, Partner, and Friend – however you understand God to be with you, be filled with God's Divine and Mysterious Presence, so that you can be Christ's love and light wherever you go and whatever your circumstances. In the name of our Triune God, in whom we live, move, and have our very being. Amen.