

WHAT IS THE TRINITY?
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It is an old joke among seminarians that the scariest thing about the idea of getting ordained is having to preach on Trinity Sunday. It is true that the idea can seem theologically daunting. I had one friend in my high school who was also considering pursuing ordination at the time, in his case as a Conservative Rabbi. Both of us marveled at the very similar concerns and questions we had about what it would be like to embrace lives as clergypersons. However, I was brought up short – and really didn't know how to respond – when he asked one day, “What about the Trinity? Doesn't that mean you believe in three gods?”

I knew that it did not mean that, but explaining the concept as a 16-year-old was beyond me. Thankfully, over a very long period of time, I have come to feel differently, as the concept of the Trinity feels like an old friend. Today, let me share with you what I have come to believe about this specifically Christian way of talking about God.

I think it all starts with the fact that God cannot really be adequately described. In today's wonderful passage from Isaiah, which describes Isaiah's call experience, the prophet searches for words to describe his overwhelming vision of the Lord in the Temple, where Isaiah served as a priest. Listen again: “... I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple... Seraphs were in attendance above him... And one called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.’ The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.” (Isaiah 6:1-4) Six-winged seraphs, singing of the glory of the Lord; smoke filling the room as it shook; these words attempt to capture the splendor and majesty of God, and the first suggestion in the Bible of the three-fold nature of God, in the three “holies,” found its way into the Trinitarian liturgies we use today. God refers to God's Self in the first-person plural, as well: “Whom shall I send, and who will go *for us*” (Isaiah 6:8). The awe-inspiring radiance and splendor and glory of God, God's boundlessness, the multiplicity of the One True God: none of this can be captured adequately in words, but can only be hinted at, suggested poetically, metaphorically.

It has been very instructive for me to journey with my daughter--now unbelievably twelve years old--as her spiritual life has developed through her childhood. She has taught me more deeply than I had known before, in a close up, personal way, that children are profoundly spiritual from the beginning. I remember a day when she was five, in her car seat alongside her best friend in the back seat, when we drove by a cemetery. “What's that?” her friend asked. “It's a cemetery,” Sarah said. “Dead people's bodies are there.” “Dead people are there?” her friend asked. “Their bodies, not their souls,” Sarah answered. “What's a soul?” her friend asked. Sounding shocked by the question, Sarah said “Your soul is what makes you a person!” Her friend seemed to take that right on board.

She and her friends have always wondered about the unseen, and continue to. Their current curiosities are on a grand, cosmic scale: fourth and fifth and tenth dimensions, alternate universes, “The Upside Down” in *Stranger Things*. Wednesday night's dinner discussion focused on where exactly Jesus is at this moment. Reincarnation, past lives, resurrection, heaven – all are active topics in our house.

The whole sense of it is that she is looking for language to describe a felt sense of the vastness of which she is a tiny part. In his classic book *The Spiritual Life of Children*, the psychiatrist Robert Coles describes children “as seekers, as young pilgrims well aware that life is a finite journey and as

anxious to make sense of it as those of us who are farther along in the time allotted us.” I knew Coles’ book twenty years before I became a father; my own daughter has brought it to life for me and taught me that young seekers like their religion on a cosmic scale: big and vast and mysterious. Isaiah’s vision in the Temple is on this scale; the hem of the Lord’s garment alone fills the sanctuary.

The Trinity is the doctrine that captures the inexpressible vastness of God. If it were easy to explain it wouldn’t be doing its job as a doctrine. What it does, though, is to gather up thousands of years of stories and visions and traditions over the course of God’s journey with God’s people as recorded in Scripture and offer a metaphor that captures and contains the essence of that vastness. The God who called to Isaiah in the Temple is the same God about whom Jesus is teaching Nicodemus in our Gospel text. While Jesus does not speak of the Trinity, He teaches about a God who creates and sends; a God who becomes flesh and is known manifestly; and a God who empowers and transforms. These three great attributes, the remote and powerful One, the incarnate and tangible One, and the sustaining One, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, are found throughout Hebrew Scripture. In the doctrine of the Trinity, the Church named them as God in Three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It is only Jesus, though, who makes it possible to sum up the vastness that is God. Nicodemus himself sensed this, as he said to Jesus “no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” (John 3:2) To be with Jesus was to be in God’s presence. Once God was revealed in human form, that vastness became at least partially finite and measurable. It allowed the Jesus movement, and eventually the Church, to dare to name God more concretely than had been done before. The Trinity does not say everything there is to say about God: nothing could ever do so. What it does say, though, is that we are not alone in the vastness, and we know this because the One who made us came to tell us so and sent the Spirit so we would never forget it.

Thanks be to God.