

Sunday, May 26, 2013: Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

by [Barry Howard](#) in the [May 15, 2013](#) issue

I was raised in a region heavily influenced by the Baptist Sandy Creek tradition, so I didn't hear the "Gloria Patri" sung in a Baptist church until I was the pastor and included it in worship. The tune to this "new" doxology was unfamiliar to most in our little congregation, but the words affirmed the long-standing Baptist doctrine of the Trinity: Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost.

I've always found it challenging to explain in a sermon or in writing how God revealed God's self as one God with three manifestations. The triune mystery tends to overload my capacity to comprehend. Jesus knew this. When he explained his impending departure to his disciples, he told them, "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear" (NIV). This encourages me to assimilate spiritual lessons gradually.

Shortly after I moved to Florida, I read about a Burmese python in the Everglades that tried to swallow a six-foot alligator. The photo revealed that as the python attempted to swallow the gator, the python actually exploded.

That picture is a parable for me as I grapple with perplexing concepts. While some truths may be simple and easy to understand, others are deep and rich in mystery; they require the wisdom and discernment that come to us only in an ongoing daily walk of faith. As we aim to grow in wisdom, which God "formed long ages ago, at the very beginning, when the world came to be," we are not alone (Prov. 8:23, NIV). Jesus promised that "when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13, NIV).

Although the word *Trinity* is not found in the canon of scripture, the majority of folks influenced by Christendom are well versed in the language of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. While a few have argued that the notion of Trinity leads to a polytheism of three different deities, most scholars note the unique solidarity of character and mission among Father, Son and Spirit.

Yet describing this God can be problematic. I recall Walter Brueggemann, in a prayer before class at Columbia Seminary, addressing God as "One who is other than us."

During that day's lecture, he made reference to God as the divine "Other" for whom we have no comprehensive description or corresponding reality, only a wealth of similes and metaphors.

For this reason the canon speaks of God anthropomorphically—because human terminology provides our only vocabulary of reference. While we recognize that God's realm of being supersedes human emotion and anatomy, we describe the indescribable God in the language we know, even though we confess that God is greater than the confines of our diction. Nevertheless we probe and we pray and we dig deeper, believing that a more intimate acquaintance with God emerges from contiguous experiences in the journey of faith and not from a single epiphany.

Perhaps it is helpful to think of these three manifestations of God as divine roles rather than distinct personalities. In *The Meaning of Jesus*, Marcus Borg addresses the concept of Trinity and explains that "in both Greek and Latin, the word translated 'person' means a mask, such as that worn by an actor in the theater—not as a means of concealment, but as a way of playing different roles. Applying this to the notion of God, the one God is known in three primary ways: as the God of Israel, as the Word and Wisdom of God in Jesus, and as the abiding Spirit."

Since it is one personality behind the masks, these divine roles are completely correlated and almost synonymic within the Trinity. Romans 5:1–5 emphasizes this: we are justified by faith in Jesus, which enables us to have peace with God and results in God's love being infused into our lives by the Spirit. The roles are neither individualistic nor competitive but interactive toward the trinitarian goal of life transformation.

The root of the word *trinity* is *unity*. As I continue to explore what it means to worship and relate to our triune God, I find myself thinking about God as one, manifest in all three roles, without contradiction. I think of God the Father as the divine parent, beyond human gender, who birthed and nurtured all of creation. I think of God the Son, the historical Jesus, as the human portrait of God. I think of the Holy Spirit as the personality of God, both Father and Son, present and interactive in the world today.

Within this mystery, I continue to discover that the love of God, the grace of God and the joy of God are synchronized in the Trinity. The notion is more than I can swallow all at once. But it is a concept that I comprehend more deeply as God's story intersects with my life and my world.