



Holy Mystery

Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead; May 31, 2026
Trinity Sunday; Psalm 8; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13

About 20 years ago, I preached my first Trinity Sunday sermon from this pulpit. I still recall, quite vividly, the hours it took to prepare that message. Why? Because I felt compelled to explain what ultimately cannot be explained. Trinity Sunday — or “God Sunday,” as it is sometimes called — is the only day in the liturgical year devoted to a doctrine of the church—and it is no small doctrine. Although Scripture speaks of God as Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit, the word “Trinity” never appears in the Bible. So, every year preachers arrive at this strange and beautiful Sunday knowing we are being asked to speak about the mystery of one God in three persons, and somehow to avoid committing heresy in the process. With that in mind, let me begin with this: if you leave church today believing that you fully understand the Trinity, I will have failed.

When reflecting upon the three persons of the one God, it’s easy to imagine the Father being first, choosing then to beget the Son, and then the Spirit proceeding from Father and Son, together.

But Professor David Gushee notes that in Scripture “there never was a time when God was not three persons. Father, Son, and Spirit were present at creation; they have been in relationship since the foundation of the world.”ⁱ

The early church knew how challenging this topic was. Gregory Nazianzen once warned that speaking of the Godhead is like trying to cross the ocean on a raft. Augustine – one of the greatest theological minds in history – spent ten years writing fifteen books on the Trinity – and even then, he arrived not at certainty but at wonder.

From the earliest days of the church, Christians wrestled with how to understand God in three persons, but the doctrine wasn’t formalized until the fourteenth century. Speculating on why the church acted then, former professor and president of Liff School of Religion, David Trickett, suggests that many early Christian writings tended to focus mostly on one aspect of God at a time—God as Creator, Jesus as Christ, or the Holy Spirit given at Pentecost—and Christians sometimes fought bitterly over which understanding mattered most. It simply may have been time, by the fourteenth century, for the church to emphasize a central conviction: although we experience God in different ways, God is ultimately one.

This calls us to respect difference—something Christians have not always done well. If God is one and yet known in many ways, and if God’s fullness always remains beyond our complete understanding, then diversity lies at the heart of God’s own life. Respecting different people, perspectives, and experiences is therefore part of our calling as people of faith.ⁱⁱ

Trinity Sunday ultimately resists every attempt to make God small enough to fit neatly within our categories. The Triune God continually stretches our understanding beyond what is comfortable, familiar, or easily explained—and that is a gift rather than a problem. Because love cannot be fully diagrammed, beauty cannot be reduced to a formula, and God cannot be contained like an object under glass. And that is not failure on our part. Because mystery is not something to conquer, but something to enter—an invitation, if you will, to live with wonder instead of certainty, to stand before God not as analysts, but as beloved souls learning to receive a gift too vast for words.

Psalms 8 opens us into this holy mystery because it begins with awe. “O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” The psalmist gazes upward into the night sky, into the moon and stars, into the vastness of creation, and asks, “What are human beings that you are mindful of them?” There is no attempt to solve God here. No effort to reduce the Holy One into neat definitions. The psalmist simply stands beneath the heavens and marvels. I suspect that’s the posture Trinity Sunday asks from us as well – a holy pause filled with wonder before the mystery of our Triune God.

Thankfully, creation offers us countless invitations into this wonder. We catch glimpses of holy mystery in the hush of dawn breaking over the mountains, in the rhythm of waves meeting the shore, in the turning of seasons that somehow continue year after year. We see it in the intricate design of a spider's web jeweled with morning dew, in the towering strength of old trees whose roots stretch unseen beneath the earth, in the sound of thunder rolling across the sky, and in the quiet persistence of wildflowers blooming through cracks in stone. Again and again, creation reminds us that there is far more happening within this world than we can fully explain.

While Psalm 8 invites us to lift our eyes toward the vast mystery of God revealed in creation, Paul's words in 2nd Corinthians bring that same mystery close enough to touch. For Paul doesn't attempt to explain the Trinity either. Instead, he sends the struggling church in Corinth a blessing: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." Notice what Paul offers them — not a definition to memorize, but an experience of God. Grace. Love. Communion. The holy mystery revealed not only in the stars above our heads, but also in relationships that heal, communities that welcome, and lives bound together by the Spirit of God.

Through the Trinity, we glimpse how relationship is at the center of reality. Before creation, before nations, before churches, before any of us existed, there was relationship *within* God: love shared, love received, love given away—which may be why loneliness wounds us so deeply—why division exhausts us—why cruelty feels so unnatural to the soul. We were not created for isolation. We were created for communion. And we encounter God as love that creates us, grace that meets us in Christ, and Spirit that binds us together. Not three gods. Not a cosmic math problem. But God in three persons continually reaching toward humanity in relationship.

In retrospect, when I preached that first Trinity Sunday sermon, I had it all wrong. I wasn't being asked to explain God. I was being asked to more fully enter into the life of God—and to invite others to do the same. So, what does that participation in the life of God look like? It looks like every act of compassion, every moment of forgiveness, and every table made wider to include one more. We behold it in the laughter of children, in mercy given, in justice rising, in communities that refuse hatred, in people who keep loving when the world tells them not to. Every act of courage, every act of hope becomes a way of standing, like the psalmist, beneath the wide heavens in wonder — caught up in holy mystery. And, along the way, we are not left without guidance or blessing. Remember Paul's words: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." Grace. Love. Communion. May they draw us ever deeper into the life of our Triune God. Amen.

ⁱ David P. Gushee, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3.

ⁱⁱ David G Trickett, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3.

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