

God is Not Flat

By
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Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

Does not wisdom call and understanding raise her voice?

² On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand;

³ beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out:

⁴ “To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all who live.

²² “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.

²³ Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.

²⁴ When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.

²⁵ Before the mountains had been shaped,

before the hills, I was brought forth,
²⁶ when he had not yet made earth and fields
or the world's first bits of soil.
²⁷ When he established the heavens, I was there;
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
²⁸ when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
²⁹ when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
³⁰ then I was beside him, like a master worker,
and I was daily his delight, playing before him always,
³¹ playing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.

Romans 5:1-5

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³ And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Over a century ago, Edwin Abbott wrote a book called Flatland, which described a place which existed in only two dimensions: length and width. It was as flat as a piece of paper. There was nothing in that imagined land that had any height or depth. In fact, there was not even a concept of height. There were a variety of characters in Flatland, but the novel focuses primarily on one who had equal length and width, Mr. Square. One day, Mr. Square received a visit from a figure from beyond Flatland named Lord Sphere, who existed in three dimensions, length, width, and depth. He tried to enable Mr. Square to understand the reality that exists beyond just two dimensions. But Mr. Square couldn't fully perceive Lord Sphere in Flatland, seeing only different-sized circles as the sphere passed through the two-dimensional plane. In Flatland, there were limits of language and perception, and a dimension yet to be experienced. Lord Sphere decided that the only way Mr. Square could begin to experience and understand a third dimension was to be led out of Flatland, where he could find out what it meant to be a three-dimensional cube. The author wrote the book under a pseudonym, identifying himself only as 'a Square.'¹ With that name, he implied his lack of understanding of the dimensions beyond himself. Mathematicians have enjoyed Abbott's imaginative glimpse into the limits of human perception, but it might have something to say to us as well.

Today, the Sunday after Pentecost Sunday, has been designated Trinity Sunday by liturgical planners suspected by preachers as having sadistic tendencies. The word, 'trinity' does not actually appear in scripture and the development of the concept led to a lot of theological fights that make up a significant portion of the church history courses taught in seminaries.

¹ Edwin Abbott, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, first published in 1884 by Seeley & Co., London.

The various lectionary scripture readings for Trinity Sunday consist of the small number of passages that include a mention of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit in the same paragraph. There also are passages like our reading from Proverbs that encourage us to move beyond the flat constraints of our thinking about God to entertain imagery that expands our world to include the feminine form of ultimate wisdom. There was no requirement that I preach about the trinity today, and before you run from the room, let me assure you that I am not seeking to instruct anyone on the linguistic contortions required in technical descriptions of the Godhead, or frankly to give opportunity for someone to charge me with heresy at this point in my career. Rather, I chose this focus today because there is a richness in our Trinitarian faith that beckons you and me to move beyond our self-absorbed ideas where we latch onto just one piece of what we believe about God resulting in us missing the fullness and majesty that is beyond our chosen narrow slice of divine truth.

However, trinitarian language and representations have their own difficulties and pitfalls. In the chancel of a sanctuary of a congregation I previously served, there were large wooden artistic carvings representing the three persons of the trinity. The cross in the middle, as a reminder of Jesus' ministry, was like many in other churches. But back on the wall behind the pulpit, there was a large hand of God similar in pose to the divine hand in Michaelangelo's Sistine Chapel painting called 'The Creation of Adam,' where God is reaching out to the symbol of the first person, Adam, as he is given life. The differences were that the wooden carving of the divine hand was even more masculine than in the painting, and it was directionally reaching down instead of across, as in the painting. From a certain angle in the sanctuary, I was told that it looked like that hand was about to scoop up the preacher from the pulpit if he or

she said the wrong thing. On the other side of the chancel was a large wooden carving of a dove. The descending dove is common imagery for the Holy Spirit. A dove flying level is a symbol for peace. This dove was oriented in a direction in-between descending and flying level – artistic choices.

As difficult as it can be, I am thankful for the attempts to have reminders of the richness of our trinitarian faith, because some people focus so much on God as reflected in the created order that they miss the revealed wonder of Jesus Christ. Others are solely enamored with Christology so that the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit gets ignored. There are groups whose hyper celebrations of the gifts of the Holy Spirit seem to leave little room for logic or reason. In part, our encounters with the balance of the Trinity can be a reminder to us that there is always more to God than we can hold in our current understanding or focus in our Flatlandish limitations. That does not mean that our beliefs and enthusiasms are necessarily wrong – it is just that we need something to be telling us that the fullness of God beckons us to move beyond where we are.

We often use the traditional language of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but certainly on Father's Day, we can understand that language has limits for some based on their experience or identity. We can use other biblical imagery for God such as the Source of Life, Word of Truth, and Spirit of Love, or God beyond us, God with us, and God within us. But whatever relational language we use, when we confess belief in the Triune God, we are making the bold and radical claim that the same God who created life out of chaos also walked the earth as Jesus. We are claiming that the One who experienced crucifixion, experienced the death of a beloved child at the exact same time. We are claiming that the One who

ascended into heaven is the same One who is always with us. We are claiming that the One who prays for us even in heaven is the same One groaning deep within our souls for the redemption of creation. When we say we believe in a Triune God, we are boldly claiming that the God who is revealed in scripture is an on-the-move God who is acting now and will act in the future until all has been reconciled and made new.

Trinitarian expressions about our God not only explore the t-r-i three-ness, but also the unity or oneness, based in the tri-unity loving relationships at the very core of God's being. A way to talk about the Holy Three-In-One is to explore the idea of God existing as divine community. There is a mutuality and interdependence that causes us to think of God as being in some kind of a circle dance, or rather, make that a sphere dance. Such an understanding of the Trinity has profound implications for our life together as people created and shaped by God's power and priorities.

For if God, at God's very core, is about mutually-interdependent relationships, then what does that say regarding the biblical assertion about we humans being created in God's image? Our human inclination is to flat-out try to create God in our own image, so we can project our narrow whims and prejudices upon the divine. However, as we begin to move beyond our flattened projections of God, the trinitarian implications move us toward relating to other humans in a way where our relationships with one another show some real depth. We don't just exist beside each other in some kind of Flatland. Rather, our identities, as children of God, indicate that we deeply need the community others can provide in order to be fully human ourselves, to be who we were created, redeemed, and empowered to be. We were made to share one another's burdens as if they are our own, because they are. We are our more rounded selves when

we can rejoice together when one of us rejoices, and as we weep together when one of us weeps.

Again, as God is divine community at God's very core, then somehow, you and I are called to figure out how to keep from losing out on a fuller vision of who we have been created to be, together. I don't always like that challenge from God, but I do believe it is real, and it can be life-enriching. Somehow, in God's great imagination and sense of humor, in our coming together as those created in God's image, we can perceive a greater dimension of the Holy Mystery and of God's good intent for humane and loving community in our world. The poetic ambiguity of the Holy Trinity is a gift that frees us to imagine together what it means for us to be created in this relational image. It frees us from the need to perfectly define our theology with only hard and fast lines. It also frees us to join the dance of the Trinity together. It frees us to rejoice in the challenges that come with our professions of faith in a God who brings glimpses of a realm beyond us into our lives until such a time as when we can fully move into God's realm. Even in this life, we don't have to live in Flatland. All honor and glory be now and forevermore unto our Creator, our Redeemer, our Sustainer who moves us into a whole new dimension.

Amen.