

In the Spring of 1985, I was taking my first theology class which had to do with the nature of God. The course was called “Christian Dogmatics.” And if it is an unfamiliar word, *dogmatics* can be defined as **a system of principles laid down by an authority, as unquestionably true**. The instructor was Dr. Carl Braaten who was brilliant but who also could come off as conceited and brusque. He would come to class in these elegant silk suits with a perfect tan from going I don’t know where in the winter time. He was very confident and rather intimidating. For a long time, I found him to be a tough person to like. I did eventually come to like him but it was difficult for me.

Dr. Braaten was always willing to engage students in conversation and dialog, but you had to know your stuff if you were going to dare to raise your hand. If you didn’t, odds were good that he would make you look foolish- like you didn’t know what you were talking about.

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I don’t remember how this particular conversation started, but I do remember how it ended. We were talking in class about the name of God and Braaten stated very succinctly that the proper name of God was “Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” This was the name by which we baptize. This is the name given by Jesus at the end of Matthew. This is the name for God. And he said it in a way that was unquestionable and undeniable. As we left class and began our way downstairs, I dared to disagree with him. I said I thought that there were other names for God. There had to be more names than just the trinitarian formula of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. With a firm and certain voice, Carl told me I was wrong and it was clear from his tone that the matter wasn’t up for discussion or debate.

He said that if I really believed what I was saying, then perhaps I should go down the street to the Unitarian Seminary. When I told him that I didn’t want to go to another seminary, that I was Lutheran and I wanted to stay Lutheran, Dr. Braaten told me that maybe I needed to seek some professional counseling.

Now, we were still in the stairwell when all of this was taking place and it was full of people. Everyone was on their way to have lunch. And he has suggested that I either leave the seminary or get a psychiatric consultation to deal with my understanding of God. Well we were almost to the first floor when we came to a consensus or maybe it was a compromise.

I agreed that Father, Son and Holy Spirit was the proper, official name of God. It is the name in which we baptize. It is the persons to whom we pray. It is the nature of God explained to us by Jesus Christ. And surprisingly, Carl agreed that perhaps God had nicknames. There are so many different names for God throughout scripture. And so I didn’t need to get counseling. I graduated from seminary and became a Lutheran pastor.

But I will never forget that conversation.

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In those days, it was still challenging to be a feminist at seminary. I wasn’t the only one trying to make sense of the mostly male imagery for God. Some preferred: Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. Some were comforted by the notion that the Holy Spirit might be female, an idea which can be easily argued based on the original Greek texts. None of us was trying to change God’s identity. We weren’t trying to shape God to fit our personal needs or understandings, but we were struggling to understand the mystery of God. The enormous, intimate, incredible, ever changing, ever constant mystery of God.

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Even if we limit ourselves to only ever speaking of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit – there is still so much that we don’t know about God. So much that we may never know about God. For starters, how does this whole trinitarian thing work? One in three? Three in one?

We are a monotheistic religion. We believe that there is only one God. That’s a very important part of Christian theology. And we confess that our God was present from the start of the world. Our God was at work before there even was a world! Our God created the world.

We believe in the creator, maker of heaven and earth, but we also talk about God as three persons. When you study the scripture, you find John speaking of how Jesus is God and was with God from the very beginning. He was born of Mary and yet he was present at the creation of the world. Jesus is God and man all at once.

And the Holy Spirit? Well he or she – was sent at Pentecost to be our advocate. Our advisor. Our helper. But the Spirit wasn’t just stirred up to come at Pentecost. The book of Proverbs describes the Holy Spirit as Wisdom- present from the start.

Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills were formed. When the Lord had yet made earth and fields, or the world’s first bits of soil. When the creator assigned the sea its limits ...

– when the Father marked out the foundations of the earth, the Spirit was there – taking delight and being delightful.

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In an essay on today's texts, Professor Karoline Lewis says that perhaps at the heart of the Trinity are Jesus words from today's gospel. "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." She says that perhaps this statement by Jesus is evidence that Jesus knew that as much as we might try, understanding the Trinity will never be easy. And never fully possible in this life. Even our most earnest attempts can never explain the full identity of God and so, Jesus words remind us of our futility and our failure when it comes to trying to explain the identity of God.

And yet, we try to make the mystery understandable by finding illustrations and words that seem to make it more understandable. Lewis says,

We do this with...righteousness or rigidity when it comes to our creeds, insisting that any kind of change in their language would somehow upset the intricate balance between the three persons.

"We do this by overstepping our bounds when it comes to determining or describing the activity of each person of the Trinity. We do it by overwrought explanations of the doctrine of the Trinity. And we do it by simplifying the relationship that exists between the three persons.

So how can we know God if God is incomprehensible? Is it possible to know God in a way that takes seriously the fact that God is beyond our human knowledge? If we truly cannot bear all that Jesus might say about himself and the rest of God's being – is it possible to have a relationship with God?

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I think the answer is that we can connect with God in many meaningful ways – but it helps if we understand that God is a mystery. Not all people are comfortable with this idea. They want God to be readily explained or they give up because who can believe in something they can't explain. But I think that when we accept that God is beyond our comprehension – faith can be recharged and renewed.

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Rudolf Otto was an incredibly influential theologian in the last century. He is best known for coming up with the concept of the numinous experience, which he said underlies all religion. The word *numinous* is from the Latin word *numen*, meaning "divine will" or "nod." So numinous is the experience of catching that holy Nod. Otto said that the numinous experience had three dimensions: *mysterium*, *tremendum* and *fascinans*.

The numinous is an experience of the *mysterium*. The mystery of God. It is wholly other from ourselves. It is entirely different from anything else that we experience in life. It is profound and most often evokes a reaction of silence and of awe.

The numinous is *tremendum*. It is tremendous. It causes us to tremble. It is majesty and might. It is the sense that God is all, and we are nothing in comparison. Otto said the numinous provokes terror because it presents itself as overwhelming power. It is energy and urgency. Will and Vitality.

Finally, the numinous presents itself as *fascinans*. It is fascinating as it draws us to its mercy and grace. It has a potent charm which attracts us even though it is tremendous and terribly powerful. We may be unsettled and yet we are drawn to it.

C.S. Lewis described the numinous experience with this illustration.

Suppose you were told there was a tiger in the next room: you would know that you were in danger and would probably feel fear. But if you were told "There is a ghost in the next room," and believed it, you would feel, indeed, what is often called fear, but of a different kind. It would not be based on the knowledge of danger, for no one is primarily afraid of what a ghost may do to him, but of the mere fact that it is a ghost. It is "uncanny" rather than dangerous, and the special kind of fear it excites may be called Dread. With the Uncanny one has reached the fringes of the Numinous. Now suppose that you were told simply "There is a mighty spirit in the room," and believed it. Your feelings would then be even less like the mere fear of danger: but the disturbance would be profound. You would feel wonder and a certain shrinking—a sense of inadequacy to cope with such a visitant and of prostration before it—an emotion which might be expressed in Shakespeare's words "Under it my genius is rebuked." This feeling may be described as awe, and the object which excites it as the *Numinous*.

When I have tried to figure this out, I have an experience that I would describe as numinous. I don't know if it was numinous for my husband Matt, but it was for me. When we got married, there was that moment when that pastor asks you to face each

other and join hands as you say your vows. There was a feeling for me that everything else around us had disappeared. There was a pastor there, telling us the words, but I have no memory of her being present. It was like there was nothing else going on in the room. It was this holy moment, not constructed by my husband, but constructed by God. It was a moment of being aware that God was present. I haven't been able to figure it out and I can't explain it. It's a mystery, but in that moment God was with us.

Now Matt was very intentional about not breaking eye contact. He was very intentional about how he said his vows, but there was more going on there than just him and me. For me that was a numinous moment.

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Rather than trying to explain the mystery of the Trinity- or find a simple explanation for the Spirit's coming in Baptism- or how it is that Jesus is truly present in Holy Communion, I think we are called to be stewards of these wonderful, mysterious things. When we embrace the fact that God is knowable and yet unknowable, we begin to grow in our relationship with God. When we begin to accept that anything might be possible with God- really possible, our lives change.

Writer Bror Erickson says there is no explaining "the mystery of God's love for the loveless. A love that answers anxiety and restores joy and meaning to life. In God's good work and good Word, we find His mystery beyond all comprehension." And that's okay. It is more than okay.

I pray that you have had a numinous experience. A sense of awe at all that God was and is and will be. A chill running up and down your back and a sense that there is something going on here and all I can do is appreciate it. They are not an everyday experience, but they do happen every day. To people of faith who open themselves up to be caught up in the holy mystery of God.