

# Holy One, Holy Three by Deborah Sokolove



**PROPHETIC HOPE**

*Angel and Prophet*

*Alek Rapoport*

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I've been away a lot these last few months. Just a few weeks ago, I was in Minneapolis, attending a conference on the arts and congregational development. When I heard the news on Thursday morning about the bridge collapse the evening before, I immediately thought of the friends and colleagues who use that bridge everyday. In response to my inquiry about her safety, one wrote:

It is such a nightmare and surreal in so many ways. We drove on that road with you so many times while you were here. ... I am O.K. but it is just so big, how can these kinds of things happen?? Anyway, thank you so much for your thoughts. Life is fragile. That said there are so many unreal stories of survival. When we heard what had happened I would have assumed that it would have been much, much worse. Because there was construction it was down to 1 lane which was a gift in that

the road was less busy. But if someone you loved was on that bridge it doesn't matter.

And so I begin with prayers for those who lost loved ones in Minneapolis this week, for the survivors, who are living with physical and emotional pain, and for everyone in the Twin Cities, who are living in shock and disbelief and fear.

As I turn from what seems to be only one more in an endless stream of senseless tragedies to what I intended to talk about this morning, it seems a little presumptuous for me to return from yet another journey and immediately stand here at the pulpit. I've missed a lot of stories, missed hearing the Word as others have come to share it, missed out on a lot of the life of the congregation. What I really want to do is just chat, to catch up on what all of you have been doing and thinking about while I (and, of course, many of you) have been in other places, and to let you know what I have been thinking and feeling and experiencing.

Of course, through the magic of email, and getting home in time for a Celebration Circle meeting, I've learned that Mary Carol's mother died; that Mike Strand has a new grandson; that the elevator has been having problems; that we had a lot of visitors from Charlotte last weekend; and that, in response to our pleas for help with all the tasks that CC usually does, Ken did not have to think of everything all by himself while the rest of CC was off on our various travels.

But what I have been missing is not simply the facts, but rather the feelings, the interchange of energy that happens when we are face to face, when you and I sit together for a meal, for a conversation, for a time of prayer. As much as I have enjoyed the conferences I have attended, the visits with my daughter and grandson, and the road trip from which Glen and I have just returned, I have missed the weekly rhythm of life at Seekers, the news of our separate and communal story at Circle Time, the prayers offered during worship. And so it

is that I stand here today feeling as if time is out of joint, intending to preach on a topic that I had wanted to address some months ago.

Actually, I had signed up to preach near the beginning of the season just past, which began with Trinity Sunday, the first Sunday after Pentecost. However, when a guest speaker with whom we had been in conversation was available only on that very day, I offered to take another open Sunday. But the preaching calendar filled up rapidly, and I was traveling, and so here I am, still held captive by the notion of the Trinity, in this, the Green season of Prophetic Hope.

We don't talk about Trinitarian theology a lot, here at Seekers. We do talk about God a lot, especially when we are wrestling with what it means that God has a call on our lives. We talk about the God of creation, and our responsibility to care for that which the Creator has made. We talk about the Holy Spirit, noticing when the Holy Spirit is in our midst, somehow giving us an answer when no answer seemed possible. And we talk about Jesus, about his life and teachings, his death and resurrection.

But we don't talk about the trinity very much. Even the term, "the trinity," sounds boring, like an old, stale, idea that all the life has been argued out of. Why do we say that God is both three and one? Our rational minds rebel at the un-mathematical, unreasonableness of it all. How can it be that God is both one and three? What is the meaning of this mysterious statement? And why does my heart beat a little faster when I think that relationship is at the heart of God's own reality?

When I was in seminary, one of the required classes was Systematic Theology, usually referred to by the shortcut, Systematics. This was a much-dreaded class, in which we began with the early church Fathers and Mothers, moving through Augustine and Thomas Aquinas to Calvin and Barth and

Schussler-Fiorenza, in an attempt to see a coherent whole in the apparent jumble of traditional Christian doctrines. There was nothing touchy-feely about it. Everything was rigorously logical, every idea or tenet connected to each other, in an elaborate, carefully-balanced whole. The main topics of the course were Theology, Christology, Ecclesiology, and Anthropology; that is, the study of the nature of God, the nature of Christ, the nature of the church, and the nature of humankind. We learned about hypostasis and homoousias, about revelation, sanctification, regeneration, about atonement and covenant and eschatology, the study of the end times. We learned to distinguish between the various heresies: those that held that Jesus was simply a human teacher, albeit one with a special connection to God; those that held that Jesus was completely divine, and was only pretending to be human; those that held that creation was a vile illusion, made not by a loving god but by an evil force; those that held that the Trinity is three separate gods; those that held that salvation was dependant on works, rather than God's good grace; and many others, mostly variants on these.

I remember thinking, much of the time, what odd things Christians believe! And the oddest thing that we ask ourselves to believe is that God is simultaneously one and three, One in Three Persons, Holy Trinity.

A classic summary of this, which many of you may have memorized as children, is that the Creator (ok, you probably learned this as the Father or the First Person) is God; Christ (or the Son or the Second Person) is God; and the Holy Spirit (or the Third Person) is God; but the Creator is not Christ or the Holy Spirit, Christ is not the Holy Spirit or the Creator, and the Holy Spirit is not the Creator or Christ.

Yikes! What happened to rigorous logic? In the mathematical logic I learned many years before, if  $a=b$  and  $b=c$ , then  $a=c$ . Apparently, something else is going on when we are talking about God.

Another challenge to my logical mind was the assertion that, regardless of the fact that we spoke of the First, Second, and Third Persons of the Trinity, and of the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father (and perhaps the Son, depending on whether one was in the Eastern or Western branch of Christianity), we were not to think of the three Persons in hierarchical terms. Double yikes! Throw out your human experience of filial obedience and parental authority! Erase any notion of numerical precedence implying importance! All three Persons are equally God, equally in charge!

Those theologians surely had themselves, and us, tied up in knots. Sometimes, I think of all these attempts to describe the nature of God as a kind of koan, one of those Zen questions that is designed not to be answered, but to break our minds open to a new reality. The more we try to capture the nature of God with logic, the more our minds rebel, until, finally, thinking stops, and we come to know God directly, beyond words and systems and ideas. What IS the sound of one hand, clapping? What WAS your face, before you were born?

In the midst of this logical thicket, my Systematics professor offered one precious gift, one suggestion of a way out. That was the lovely notion that the essential reality of the three Persons of God is relationship, and that the form of their relationship is perichoresis. This Greek word comes from a root that means "to dance" and a prefix that means "around." And so we are able to picture the three persons of God not in a fixed, hierarchical relationship, in which orders begin with the First Person, and are transmitted by the Second Person to be carried out by the Third Person; but, rather, that each of the three Persons of God move around one another in an eternal dance, each sometimes leading, each sometimes following, all in perpetual harmony and equality with one another. In my mind, they look like Botticelli's three graces, continually dancing in the lush, eternal springtime of his famous painting, Primavera.

In this painting, three young women – Aglaia (Splendor), Euphrosyne (Mirth), and Thalia (Good Cheer) – are gathered in a circle, light robes flowing in a gentle breeze. Each has one foot fully planted on the ground, and the other gracefully pointed, ready to move in a new direction. Their hands are loosely joined, alternately raised and lowered, in a rhythmic gesture of connection and joy. They face one another, but somehow their glances also include the other figures in the painting, inviting everyone, including us, the viewers, to join the dance.

Well, that's one image. Another image is that of the three Fates, Clotho who spins the Thread of Life, Lachesis who measures the length of the yarn, and Atropos, who wields the scissors that cuts the thread. These have their counterpart in Norse mythology, the three Norns who sit at the base of the world tree, Ygdrasil, weaving the tapestry of history. I think also of the three Weird sisters of English lore; and so many other tri-partite goddesses who are associated with past, present, and future elsewhere in the wonderful multiplicity of human culture.

I would like to suggest that these and other mythological affinities to the number three encode a basic three-ness in our own, human experience. Made in the image and likeness of a God who is somehow both one and three, we experience ourselves, also, as simultaneously one and three. We know ourselves as body, soul, and mind. Try, for a moment, to imagine yourself as body and soul, but mindless. ... or body and mind, without a soul. ... Or, as soul and mind, but without a body ... In each case, something essential to our experience of humanity is missing. That, among other things, is why Christianity has always proclaimed its belief in the resurrection of the body. While I don't pretend to understand how this can be or what it means, it certainly makes sense to me. To be human is to know ourselves as incarnate, thinking, spirits, each aspect with its own functions, yet inseparable

from one another.

There was a final exam at the end of my class in Systematics, in which we were expected to give factual answers about who believed what in which period, and to identify each of those heresies I mentioned earlier by its proper name. I've heard that in recent years, that is no longer the case. Instead, students are asked to write their own Credo, their own statement of belief, using the terms and arguments that they have learned in what is now a full-year course in systematic theology. If I had to do that today, here's what I might write in the section on the Trinity:

I believe that our understanding of God as three is deeply connected with our understanding of ourselves as created in the image and likeness of God. It is not accidental that we are told to love God with all of our hearts and souls and minds, and our neighbors as ourselves. It is not accidental that we come to know ourselves most fully when we attend to the inner journey of the self, the outer journey of service, and the communal journey of collaborative creation.

I believe that the non-hierarchical, eternally dancing Trinity teaches us something about how to order human society. If, like the Graces in the painting, we are always a little bit off-balance, one foot always lifted, bodies leaning slightly in one direction or another, then we can only keep from falling by depending on the others around us, allowing the inner logic of the dance itself to keep us all in harmony. Just as the Trinity does not need one ruler always at the top, and everyone else always obeying, so we humans can arrange ourselves in egalitarian groups, allowing each to lead at the point of his or her gift.

I believe that notion of the Trinity expresses many of the paradoxes inherent in the ways that we talk about God. Sometimes, we talk about God as a loving parent, who only wants good things for us, God's children. Sometimes, we talk

about God as mighty creator, who brought into the being the sun and moon and stars and planets. Sometimes, we think God is transcendent, remote, immutable, totally beyond our knowing. Sometimes God is close at hand, our nearest, dearest friend. Sometimes God is in the face of another person, whether friend or stranger. Sometimes, God dwells within us, living in our hearts.

I believe that God is all these things. The God who lives within us is the same God as the one who animates the storm, who holds the stars and planets in their places, who is the very ground of our being. When I experience the awe and wonder of the universe, I know that I am in the presence of the transcendent, unknowable, unnamable, sometimes dangerous, always unpredictable Creator of all things. When I hear the voice of God calling me to my best self, inviting me into a life of love and service, asking me to see the good in all persons and to act for the good of all in everything that I do, I know that I am in the presence of Christ, who embodied God's love for humankind. And when I feel most alive and vibrant, filled with possibilities, certain that God is within me as well as immanently present in every tree and flower, every river and rock, and every person or creature that I see, then I know that this is God, the Holy Spirit, which has been poured into me and courses through me as a never-ending fountain of living water.

I believe that there is prophetic hope for our lives, both individually and in community, in knowing God as triune being, as the Holy One, the Holy Three, undivided yet distinct. When my children were young, and I was not yet a Christian, they would sometimes ask me about God. In those days, without a community to help me, sometimes I would say that God is the force that holds everything in the universe together. Other times, I would say, simply, that God is love. Today, it seems to me that both answers are meant the same thing. The love of God is not some weak, sentimental feeling. Rather, it is the



essential energy that flows between and among the three Persons of God, and expands outwards to contain all of creation. Despite failing bridges, interminable wars, and the violence, greed, and corruption that seems to be everywhere we look, I believe that God's model of community, of relationship, of love continues to bind us to one another, guiding us to a better way.

I believe in that green, eternally budding hope. And I'm glad to be home.