

“WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS NOW IS ... MYSTERY”

Isaiah 6:1-3; Luke 24:28-35

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Intro to the scriptures: Let me just tell you that I won't be saying anything explicitly about these texts in the sermon. But I think you will be able to hear how the themes in the scriptures undergird what I'm saying. Both of these scriptures deal with what we might term “experiences of divine presence.” The context for Isaiah 6 is a place of worship, a place understood as a holy place – so it began, perhaps, with seeking, or maybe with routine participation in worship. But what happens is far from routine; Isaiah has a dramatic, powerful, heart-stopping vision of the glory of God. The story from Luke is rather different. It begins in the most ordinary of settings – a simple meal, shared between two friends and a stranger.

Read scripture(s)

Come, true light; come life eternal.
Come, hidden mystery.
Come, treasure without name.
Come, reality beyond all words.
Come, person beyond all understanding.
Come, rejoicing without end.
Come, light that knows no evening.
Come, raising of the fallen,
Come, resurrection of the dead.
Come, you who draw near to us who lie in despair.
Come, for your name fill our hearts with longing and is ever on our lips.
Come, our breath and life.
Come, the consolation of the humble soul.
Come, our joy, our glory, our endless delight. (attributed to St. Symeon, Greek theologian, 949-1022)

I begin with this prayer because that seemed a better place to begin than with the admission – or complaint – that today's theme turned out to be a lot harder to talk about than I expected! I looked in many, many books about the Christian life without finding much about the mystery that lies at the heart of faith. And what was more surprising - few of our hymns touch on it, either.

I guess that is the nature of mystery. It IS hard to talk about the unknown.

Now, the Mystery that faith gathers itself around is quite a different thing from that of the mystery novels I read in my spare time. Even if you don't read that genre of literature (or watch its TV equivalent) you know that a classic mystery story is all about the eventual revealing of the who, what, why, where, and how (or better yet, if you're a clever reader, figuring it out!) By the end, all is known.

But Mystery with a capital M is something entirely different. It is the unknown and unknowable. The Transcendent. The Infinite. What someone called “the Really Real.” It's

“an immensity we will never completely comprehend because somehow that immensity comprehends us, and stretches toward an infinity we cannot fully see.” (Doughty, p. 44)

It's hard for us, living in the world we live in, to make room for this. Somebody commented to me the other day about how we feel affronted when we hear the news that medical science can't cure an ailment – tests didn't find the cancer, treatment is ineffective, doctors just don't know. We have come to expect that science or technology can provide answers and solutions, if applied with enough skill and persistence – not only in medicine, but in education, economics, environmental issues and a host of other areas. Certainly a lot remains unknown, but, we tell ourselves, it's just that we don't know the answers *YET*. Given enough research, enough technological advance in methods and tools, enough resources, enough application of our minds and reason ... humanity will eventually have explanation for everything and solutions to the problems that now seem so intractable.

But the history of the last hundred years or so has taught us that knowledge sometimes leads to more questions and the solution to one problem often begets more and bigger problems. Those who have grown wise with experience generally say, “The more I learn, the more I realize I don't know.” Coming up against those limits makes us aware that we live surrounded by mystery.

Christians and other religious folk identify the power and presence and holiness of God as the heart of that Mystery – although we are sometimes not any better than anyone else at dealing with it or talking about it, and try to avoid it as much as possible. It is so much more comfortable to deal with what we can see and manage. But recognition of the Mystery is basic to our faith tradition (indeed, to almost all faith traditions).

Our culture is not very comfortable with mystery, and the stuff that fills our days and on which we spend our energy is mostly the very antithesis of Mystery... but there are times when we are made aware that we live in the presence of Mystery.

We may walk into a candlelit sanctuary on Christmas Eve and feel it; or we might stand under the stars knowing both our own tininess and an awe of something immeasurably bigger and deeper than we can comprehend. We may have lives filled with good things, and still feel the tug of something more.

Nora Gallagher writes about being moved from passive participation in church to a deeply engaged faith by what felt like a firm, gentle pressure between her shoulder blades. (p.77) In *Take this Bread*, Sara Miles tells about walking into a church service on impulse one day – at the age of 46 – receiving communion for the first time in her completely secular life and being reduced to tears, inexplicably transformed by the experience. She was, she says, “hungering and thirsting for righteousness,” though she hadn't known it. (p. xi-xiii)

Daily, “ordinary” things we can't explain also remind us – things like individuality, love, inspiration, the way nature's beauty and intricacy speak to us, a spark of connection with another person, tiny glimpses of light on our darkest days. The big questions that sometimes bubble up, in spite of the tasks and information and “stuff” that fill our days ... those, too, remind us of the mystery at the heart of the universe.

As I said, religion is the way human communities have acknowledged the Mystery, which we call “God.” But even in the realm of religion we fall prey to denial or avoidance of Mystery. God is reduced dogmas and catechism answers. To a simple, comfortable, easily-

comprehended image or two. To a kind of holy rubber stamp for our own wishes. To a kind of good energy you can tap into, if you know the secret, for certain kinds of assistance.

Folks who follow more conservative Christian traditions like to present evidence to “prove” that Jesus rose from the dead or that the Genesis creation stories are literally true. To this way of thinking, rational arguments and a logical “defense” of Christian doctrine are supposed to persuade people to faith.

More “liberal” traditions have presented scientific explanations for the miracles of Jesus and reinterpreted Biblical stories of divine intervention in ways that seem more “rational” to modern readers.

Both those paths, so dissimilar in other ways, are alike in discomfort with the mystery, with unanswered questions, with a God who is not tame or predictable or definable or fully knowable.

I’m reminded of Annie Dillard’s reflections on our determination to make God simple and friendly and the way of faith tame and comfortable: “Why do we people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute?” She wonders if we should be wearing crash helmets when we gather for worship, or if ushers should hand out life preservers. Because God might take offense at our casualness, or – even more frightening – call us out of our routine and change the trajectory of our journey forever. (p. 40-1)

She wrote that almost 35 years ago, but it may be even more true today.

Millions of people now attend church services with great technical production values and practical advice for Christian living, but little in the way of symbol or sacrament or invitation to reverence in the presence of holy mystery. And in some circles – in an outside churches - the closest thing to mystery is sentimental superstition about guardian angels on our shoulders and the like.

In the mainline church we tend to just not pay too much attention to the parts of the gospel and the tradition we can’t explain, and simply focus instead on what Jesus calls us to - service, action, compassion, making a difference in the world, teaching our children well, helping each other, fellowship, and so forth. Nothing wrong with any of that, and indeed our profession of faith wouldn’t mean much if we didn’t do those things ... but the truth is, most people can find or participate in all of that someplace else.

But who else will invite them into mystery? Where else will they hear, in the words of Huston Smith, “the news of a world that is vastly more real than the one we humans normally experience”? Where else will they find people who will acknowledge the mystery, who will make space for it in the midst of schedules and bottom lines and information?

I heard someone say recently that the church will have a future only if “encounter with divine transcendence” is part and parcel of how we understand and practice the life of faith. (John Stewart, sermon at Presbytery of Lake Michigan meeting) I wonder if it’s true. I think it might be.

I know it might seem odd to be talking about ‘mystery’ after a week in which more unarmed black men were senselessly shot and killed by police officers, and other police officers courageously doing their jobs were wounded or killed by a sniper, a week in which racism and hate and violence have filled us with anger and sorrow and bewilderment. But I would say that these are days in which we need to dig a little deeper into the resources of our faith, days in which we need to pay attention to a higher calling and a vision beyond what we can

see. I don't know how anyone can deny that we are in spiritual crisis. All our knowledge and progress and programs have not brought us justice, safety or peace.

The world needs people who can talk about the always-near and loving God, who in Jesus shared our human journey, who weeps with us in our sorrow and helplessness ... and who can also talk about the transcendent not-like-us God, whose very being draws us toward a purer and truer sense of justice and compassion. The world needs people whose *lives* reveal this God.

The world needs people who admit human limits and a need for God. The world needs people who can see beyond now to a new day. The world needs people willing to have a radical trust in the unseen reality of God's reign. The world needs people who can be comfortable with questions, with uncertainty, with listening and waiting. The world needs people who have the courage to say "I don't know" and "maybe we can't know" and "this is a mystery."

The world needs worshipping communities that dare to engage "the beyond-all-knowing God." (Poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, quoted in Stewart, p. 173) The world needs people who are not merely looking for an occasional spiritual experience but who understand that to be human beings is to be spiritual beings. The world needs people who can speak about "holiness," "glory," and "spirit," people who can "bow before mystery, honor it in our public and private worlds." (Doughty, p.50)

The world needs this. But Mystery is not to be regarded as a "resource" to tap into. Psychiatrist Gerald May wrote, "It is not for us to use the power of mystery, but for us to be used by it. We do not embrace it in our arms, it embraces us. We do not capture it but are captured by it." (Doughty, p. 50-1)

The world needs us to act and serve and speak and care. But the world also needs us – first of all - to be people willing to be captured by the mystery of the God who is bigger than we are. The world needs us to be able to say, and show, what it means to us be embraced by the Love that sustains the universe. The world needs us to make space for the attention to mystery, to spirit, to transcendence and holiness, that human hearts long for. The world needs people who are shaped not by programs, budgets, agendas, and self-interest, but by encounter with the transforming mystery of the One "in whom we live and move and have our being." (Acts 17:28) Amen.

Resources:

Steve Doughty, *To Walk in Integrity: Spiritual Leadership in Times of Crisis*

John W. Stewart, *Envisioning the Congregation Practicing the Gospel*

Wendell Berry, *Life Is a Miracle*

Sara Miles, *Take This Bread*

Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*

Nora Gallagher, *Things Seen and Unseen*