

1 Corinthians 2:1-12    Mystery  
Psalm 112  
February 5, 2023

Who doesn't love a good mystery? It is one of the most popular genres in both film and literature. The general idea is that something has happened and it is unexplained. There are unanswered questions. Sometimes the imagination is stretched, in a good way.

When we are in a movie theatre or in front of the fire on a cold winter's night with a good novel, there is almost a joy that keeps us interested and turning pages. But when the mystery regards our own life, or life itself, we are sometimes less patient.

The Scriptures sometimes speak of God or the things of God as mystery. In the epistle today, Paul speaks of the "hidden things of God," literally, the "mystery." Personally, I am attracted to the idea of God as mystery; holy, transcendent, beyond all knowing. But there are times when I desire resolution, all mysteries solved.

For some, mysteries are never good, but everything explained, and in plain terms is what is desired. When we come to church or to the scriptures, and are hoping for and seeking mysteries solved, we find the proclamation of a mystery, not the resolution to it.

The Apostle Paul has spoken of the distinction between what he calls, "the wisdom of the world," and

the cross, which represents God's wisdom. He has proclaimed with great rhetorical skill that God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, God's weakness is stronger than human strength; that the low things of God are higher than the highest of all human aspirations and achievements.

These chapters seem almost a commentary on the 40th chapter of the Book of Isaiah, which asks;

"Why do so say, O Jacob,  
and complain, O Israel,  
My way is hidden from the Lord,  
my course is disregarded by my God?"

And then the answer comes in the 55th chapter;

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
neither are your ways my ways,' declares the Lord,  
'As the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so my ways are higher than your ways,  
and my thoughts than your thoughts.'"

"We see through a glass darkly, as if in a mirror." We are left with mystery.

According to Paul, however, at least part of this mystery *is* resolved, or perhaps a little better stated, revealed, in the cross of Jesus Christ. From the point of view of faith, of some time spent as a believer as a part of a believing community seeking to learn and grow in that faith, the cross does make things a bit less mysterious.

When we acknowledge our limitations, the inability to comprehend divine things, a life dedicated to cross theology becomes increasingly palatable, and after awhile, less hidden. In fact, it is the “way of the world,” that becomes less and less palatable, and increasingly confounding. The unending pursuit of pleasure, or the perpetual human habit of going to war.

As we gather here in February, only a month or so after Christmas, and a couple of weeks before Lent, (about two months before Easter), it is once again the time of the year for us to think about these things, and in the gospel accounts, the end is known from the start. It is a little like watching a movie about the Titanic, which is not much of a mystery, everyone knows how it ends. In our case, it ends with the cross, the empty tomb.

The cross forces us to see that what has only temporal significance, that is, value for the present situation, is likely to have little eternal value. That vision means, “what you can’t take with you, isn’t worth much time and energy.” The cross means that we do not win by trying to control the circumstances of our lives, or the people that are closest to us. We win by losing.

If Jesus had done what would be expected of him, then he would have *sought* political power, he would have *sought* wealth, he would have led a revolt. At least he would have sought to protect his own life, extending it for another day, another fight.

But that is not what Jesus did, Instead he seemed to have *sought* arrest, and he simply didn’t put up a very strong defense, though he was innocent, and he submitted to the authorities of this world; to Pilate and to Sanhedrin, that is the state and the church, even when they condemned him to death.

And that act, of redemptive self-sacrifice, has eternal significance, it *is* something that survives the grave. It is presented to us as from God, holy and eternal.

Even though we rarely follow the example, in some ways we can. For what it reveals is that God cares more about relationships with people than the execution of justice. For that is what the cross does. It executes justice in love. It is God taking upon himself the condemnation that belongs to us in order to restore the relationship.

We follow Christ’s example when we stop judging our neighbors, and accept them as they are, even if we think they are mistaken about something, or are living a harmful life in some way. We do that when we consider a relationship as more important than being right; as something that can have eternal meaning.

We do, of course, know, that material life, the life of this world and things, has no such meaning. We have things, and we use things, but we do not place an eternal value on them; neither our houses or cars or computers or anything else. They do have earthly significance, temporary, this-worldly. They are just things.

A little farther along in 1 Corinthians, Paul elaborates on the meaning of the cross in a way we might find helpful. He is writing about marriage, but he mentions other things:

“From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not (I am sure that he would agree that the same sentiment applies to those who have husbands); those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.” 1 Corinthians 7:29-31

I will leave you with a quote from Paul Tillich, the theologian of the 20th century, who put it this way;

“Have as having not - this is the right attitude towards everything great and wonderful in life, even religion and Christianity. But it is not the right attitude toward the New Creation (Cross and empty tomb). Toward it, the right attitude is passionate and infinite longing.”

And there you have it, a little of the mystery solved, and who doesn't love a good mystery? And also revealed, a little part of the meaning of our lives.

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