

The Mystery of Faith – Teresa Holden

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

What wonderful Scriptures we have today, as we celebrate Epiphany. The word “epiphany” means “sudden realization.” In the story of the Magi who came to visit Jesus, these people had an epiphany in Jesus’ infancy; they had a “sudden realization” that this baby was a king. Our other Scriptures affirm attributes of Jesus, things that make Him different from any other king that has ever existed. First, He fulfills the Old Testament prophecy and is the light of the world who illumines the deep darkness. (This is such a powerful and relevant metaphor for us as we plod through the darkest, coldest days of the year.) Psalm 72 emphasizes the fact that justice radiates from God (and, therefore, Jesus), who is always just; and Paul in Ephesians reminds us of the fact that God pours out grace upon the world. The idea of an “epiphany” touches upon another characteristic of our faith that Paul highlights in Ephesians. That is the fact that having faith in Jesus Christ is a mysterious venture. Paul uses the word “mystery” four times in twelve verses as a name for how we experience Jesus’ work in the world. Placing Ephesians 3 in the context of our other Epiphany Scriptures helps us to understand that “Epiphany” isn’t something that happened once a long time ago. This revelation about a baby King who would be the Light of the world, perfectly just, yet full of grace, has been a continuously unfolding mystery in which we all personally participate.

A mystery is a hard thing to explain. As I attempt to this morning, I am again reminded of my psychology degree advisor at the University of Notre Dame, Dr. McCabe, whom I talked about the last time I preached here. Dr. McCabe was a man of such few words that most everything he said to me left an indelible impression. During one of my weekly advising sessions, he drew on my literature background to make this point: “Teresa,” he said, “you will find that real life is stranger than fiction. In fact,” he said, “all of the plot lines and themes of literature exist because they are rooted in human experience.” As I’ve thought about this more, it helps me to understand why Christians hold dear the fictional Narnia series by C.S. Lewis. These books reveal just how mysterious our faith is. None of us has ever walked out of a wardrobe into a cold, snowy land, but we have all felt the chill of loneliness. God is not a loving lion, but we can understand many of God’s attributes when we think about this metaphor. The fiction pushes us toward greater insights about the mystery of God.

Similarly to characters in the Narnia series, we all experience epiphanies about the nature of God and the role that God wants to play in our lives. As we look back, we can see these as continuous revelations of God’s presence in our lives. They vary from little (or big) miracles to moments when we have struggled long and hard with something that didn’t seem to have any end, and then a moment of sudden clarity occurred, and we realized that God had been there all along. Or we see events that we have been praying about unfold in ways that we never could have imagined. This is the mystery of our faith—that God grants us the grace to believe and participate in God’s continued revelation to us and to the world. So we experience epiphanies over a lifetime as we see God working in ourselves and in people around us.

Another mystery of the faith is the fact that God is perfectly just, while also being full of grace. This is emphasized in the lectionary today as we see Psalm 72 and Ephesians 3 side by side. As a finite human person, I find justice and grace a little hard to reconcile.

Justice, to me, means fairness. It means that everyone is subject to the same rules and penalties, so that everyone can make informed decisions about their behavior. In a just system, no one is either advantaged or disadvantaged. So I am a just faculty member when I create a policy for late work that I adhere to for everyone. Everyone knows about the policy up front, and I stick to it because I want to be fair to everyone. If I allow someone the advantage of handing in something late, but I haven't given that privilege to everyone else, that would be unjust to the people who handed their work in on time.

On the other hand, grace means "unmerited favor;" it means that everyone receives an advantage from God to not get what he or she justly deserves. Everyone sins, so everyone justly deserves the punishment for sin, but God, through grace, allows all of us forgiveness. This relationship between justice and grace is a mystery that I don't fully comprehend, something that God continues to reveal to me, and also to the world. Two examples of how justice and grace work together are evident in two remarkable events from history that affirm God's love as the strongest force in the world.

The first example comes from the twentieth-century civil rights movement and is embodied in the practice of non-violent resistance. In my 20th Century African American history class I show a video with footage of volunteers receiving training from the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee about how to do non-violent protest. In order to prepare them for what was ahead, the volunteers were subject to being hit, shoved, sworn at, white and black young people being called pejoratives to train them to do something that does not come naturally. The strategy was to show grace and love to those who attacked them, rather than to give back to people what they deserved, which was violence and hatred. This strategy of non-violence was a tricky tightrope to walk, and not everyone agreed with it. Martin Luther King, Jr., who did not originate the practice of non-violent resistance in the south, was nonetheless able to eloquently articulate its purpose in a way that the American public could understand. Non-violence was a demonstration of God's love for those who would hurt them, for those who would perpetuate injustice. So grace and justice collided. The message of God's love was irresistible, particularly to American Christian churches, which in 1964 found the resolve to lobby heavily for the passage of the Civil Rights Act. Historian Todd Purdum attributes the passage of this legislation in large part to the vocal outcry of American Christians who called their congressmen and organized within their denominations and through national organizations in a movement for civil rights.¹ Grace and love came together to bring about a measure of justice.

I learned about my second example from a sermon that Brian Hartley preached in the fall, in which he talked about the World War II bombing of Coventry, England. Referred to as the Coventry Blitz, this attack in 1940 was the first of three times that the city of Coventry was bombed. The 1940 attack was the most devastating German attack on the city, and it was intended to make a statement to the British people that civilian

populations would not be spared. 75% of the city's buildings were destroyed, including half of the city's homes. More than 500 hundred people died. The scope of the destruction became memorialized in the German vocabulary, as German leaders created a verb "to coventrate" that denoted the destruction that they inflicted in similar attacks on other cities.²

The Nazis intended for the attack to destroy a major British industrial site and also to inflict severe psychological trauma that could possibly break the spirit of the British people. The residents of Coventry were truly devastated, but they gained hope from the actions of the Anglican leader at Coventry Cathedral, and the church's stonemason. Coventry Cathedral as a location represented 1,000 years of Christian belief that had existed in this region, and the building had stood in its location for over 500 years. The cathedral was all but destroyed, with only a few exterior walls standing. As the church's stonemason inspected what was left of this once beautiful building, he noted that two "charred medieval roof timbers had fallen into the shape of a cross." The stonemason set them up on "an altar of rubble" with the inscription "Father Forgive" above them on the sanctuary wall. Further, the provost of the cathedral declared that the church would be rebuilt, not as an act of defiance, but rather to become a place of peace and reconciliation. In a nationally broadcast radio address on Christmas Day, a month after the attack, Provost Howard said that when the war was over, the church would work with those who had been enemies, "to build a kinder, more Christ-child-like world." When the war ended, the church actively sought to promote this goal; today they work with 170 international partners in a shared ministry of reconciliation.³

The stunning part of this story is that members of this community participated in Christ's mysterious ministry of grace and love, not after ten years of healing had taken place, but the very next day, as fire still smoldered in their homes, and they were still discovering their dead. This is a remarkable mystery, and it is also the hope of our faith—that God can transform people, can transform even us to forgive actively those who are hurting us, even when forgiveness is not sought, and injustice continues. This is the hope of Christ's light that shines in the world.

A new, modern Coventry Cathedral was commissioned after the war and completed in 1962. The remaining walls of the old cathedral stand alongside the new cathedral as a memorial to those who died. Interestingly to us at St. Paul's, who are lovers of sacred art, the cathedral grounds, including the interior of the new cathedral and the exterior spaces house pieces of art that have been either donated to the church (even by former enemies) or created for the church, as others wanted to participate in their ministry of reconciliation. One of the most interesting pieces is a charcoal sketch of what is called the "Stalingrad Madonna," created by a German physician who was serving in the German army during their miserable siege at Stalingrad. The physician created the sketch during Christmas season of 1942, what has been described as "loneliest Christmas in all the world" for these German soldiers. The physician died as a prisoner of war in Stalingrad, but copies of his sketch are now displayed in the Kazan Cathedral in that city, in the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in Berlin and in Coventry Cathedral. At the time that he created it, the physician described his sketch in this way: "The picture looks

like this: the mother's head and the child's lean toward each other, and a large cloak enfolds them both. It is intended to symbolize 'security' and 'mother love.' I remembered the words of St. John: light, life, and love. What more can I add? I wanted to suggest these three things in the homely and common vision of a mother with her child and the security that they represent."⁴

Along the side of the sketch are written the three German words, "*Licht, Leben, Liebe*," translated, "Light, Life, Love." This German soldier articulated through his art and his words the desire that all people have, the desire for light, life and love. Epiphany reminds us of the fact that the great mystery of the world, the mystery of how to satisfy these desires, is found in Jesus. The world, both the big macro world of forces beyond our control and our small worlds of individual needs and desires, can only find satisfaction through the baby King who is the Light of the world; who is perfectly just, yet full of grace and in whose continuously unfolding mystery we can all personally participate.

¹ See Todd S. Purdum, *An Idea Whose Time Has Come* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014) 230-232. He elaborates on these ideas on *Fresh Air*, "The Politics of Passing 1964's Civil Rights Act," January 20, 2014. <http://www.npr.org/2014/01/20/263483489/the-politics-of-passing-1964-s-civil-rights-act>

² *History Learning Site*, "The Bombing of Coventry in 1940," 2014. http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/bombing_Coventry_1940.htm

³ All quotes: <http://www.coventrycathedral.org.uk/about-us/our-history.php>.

⁴ All quotes: <http://www.feldgrau.com/articles.php?ID=74>

Note from Dr. Holden: I recommend the FREE Coventry Cathedral app for your smart-phone! Just go to your app store and search for *Coventry Cathedral*. It allows one to view all of the art in the cathedral—took a little bit for me to figure out the whole app, but ultimately I found that I could gain a 360 degree view of the art in the church, so it's possible to see where it is in the church and what surrounds it. It's quite powerful. More description from the Google app store: *Explore over a thousand years of history and worship at Coventry Cathedral. ... This app, developed in collaboration with the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture at the University of York, offers a guide to the spiritual, cultural and historical life of the three cathedrals that have stood on this site over the past 1000 years. Also featured is an acoustic reconstruction of the cathedral building before it was bombed in 1940. Now you can "stand" in the ruins and "listen" to music sung from the High Altar as it would have sounded when the church was intact. Experience the cathedral in a way no one has been able to for over 70 years...*