

The Mystery Of Faith – Bob Munshaw

Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

A couple of months ago, Jen and I went on a cruise to celebrate our 25th anniversary. We are both readers, and had never been on a cruise before, so each packed a couple of books. I was looking for something easy ... a page-turner. After wandering around the house looking at possible choices, I decided to go with an Agatha Christie book. We have a handful of them from used book sales. Anyway, I ended up reading “And Then There Were None.” It was a fun little murder mystery in which ten seemingly random individuals are mysteriously invited to a mansion on an otherwise deserted island. I don’t want to give too much of the story away in case you need an easy read one day. Suffice to say that there end up being an ever-growing number of bodies and serious paranoia in the mansion. So, I enjoyed the book, and ended up reading a few more of Christie’s novels, but after a while, you realize that these are very similar stories with slightly different plots. They are not terrible, especially if you like a mystery, but they are a little “meh” after a while.

These little stories present a certain kind of mystery, and there are always clues. If you can find enough clues ... evidence ... eventually you can put all the pieces together and solve the puzzle. That is one kind of mystery. The Scriptures this morning present a different kind of mystery—Emmanuel, God with us—God amongst us—God speaking to people, and moving them through the power of the Pneuma.

There is mystery in our faith that baffles the mind at times. At the very of it are a string of questions. I look in the mirror and wonder. How is it that I exist? How is it that any of us exist? Where did we come from? And of course there are the theories. We came because some gasses in space randomly collided and just happened to allow for earth to form and over billions of years for life eventually to evolve. But, where did those gasses come from? Or we say that God created, and different religions have different theories about it. Christians even vary about this mystery of creation. Some say that Genesis 1 and 2 should be read literally, and that a few thousand years ago God made the world in a six-day span and then rested. Other Christians believe that God chose to use evolutionary processes to create the world. In either theory, God lovingly designed the world as a beautiful abode. But still, to be fair, just as we asked where the gasses floating in space came from, we also are left wondering as Christians: where did God come from? Mystery.

Most of us, by the fact that we are here today, have chosen to believe that somehow God exists, and that God, in some way, created this universe, and this world that is our home. We have also chosen to believe that the Bible is a record of this God entering time and space again and again to interact with the world and with the people whom God created. We say this, but it is mystery. We are relying on the evidence of ancient men and women that lived thousands of years ago. We are also relying on our own experience of the presence and power of God in this world. This is a mystery, too ... a mystery of faith.

In Genesis 12, we have the well-known story of the call of Abram. Abram's story actually begins earlier than our text. Chapter 11 gives us the buildup to this Abram guy. We get lineage that traces all the way back to Shem, the son of Noah. We also get some details about Abram's immediate family. They are from Ur of the Chaldees (or Babylon). Archeology has revealed that Ur was a great and wealthy city in the ancient world with harbors, temples, stone palaces, private houses, and even pyramids. The Chaldeans had a pantheon of gods and goddesses. The rich were at times buried after death, with many servants so as to have someone serve them in the afterlife. Ur was a big deal in the ancient world.

I mentioned that chapter 11 gives the lineage of Abram. Reading "who begat whom" is less exciting than reading your tenth Agatha Christie novel. I suspect that we have some discerning Bible readers here. You may know that there are numbers of genealogies listed in Genesis, and when we run into them, our eyes do tend to gloss over, as people whose names are meaningless to us and largely unpronounceable are being begat. But the informed and careful reader knows that these genealogies are an important part of the story. They point out to the readers just who the Hebrew people are, and where they came from, and how they are related to their neighbors in the ancient world.

So the author of Genesis has taken some time in Chapter 11, as boring as it may seem, to clue us in that someone important is coming into the story. We are given no reason in chapter 11 as to why Abram's father, Terah, moved the family from Ur, which was in Babylon, southeast of Canaan; but move they did, to Harran, which is in present-day Syria, northeast of Canaan. Harran was a city quite involved in the caravan trade, on the route going around the Arabian Desert. Maybe Terah was a rich trader, and the family was seeking wealth. Maybe they had flocks of sheep or cattle. We don't know much. What we do know is that in Abram's 75th year ... mystery.

How did it happen? How does it ever happen? Does it ever happen? Judge for yourself, but the author of Genesis 12 wants us to believe that God entered time and space and spoke. I like to imagine how it happened. Did Abram hear a voice in his head? Was Abram one of those people who are always hearing voices? Was it like with Paul, where old Abram heard an audible voice that shocked him so much that it knocked him off his horse, or was it like Moses with the burning bush in the wilderness? However it happened, the author is clear that God met Abram and spoke to him, and even the words of God's call and promise are preserved for us.

This narrative is crucial to the self-understanding of what would become the Israelite people. God tells Abram to go to a land God would show him. And so, at 75 years old, Abram packs up his family and all his possessions and heads south. Of course, there are many chapters to the story of Abram, his wife, Sarai, and his nephew Lot, as they begin to plant themselves in Canaan, but this simple response of faith in God is the beginning. And the promises of God here are important. They are land, descendants that will become a great nation, and this word that all peoples on earth would be blessed through Abram. Paul, writing and interpreting the story of Abram, perhaps 1500 to 2000 years later, wants his readers to understand mystery. Paul can be a little crotchety and out of sorts at times,

but as a former full-time pastor, I can kind of understand how he may have gotten that way. The church is full of people, and people are people. We can be so magnanimous at times, and we can also be complete wretches. In Paul's letters and travels he is constantly trying to deal with theological issues and fighting in the churches. One of the issues he deals with regularly, in our text, and especially also in Galatians, is faith and the laws of Moses. Paul encourages his readers in Galatians 5 to listen to ... mystery—to lean in and hear the Pneuma, the very Spirit of God, and then keep in step with the Spirit wherever Pneuma leads.

Paul is dealing with these same issues in Romans chapter 4. He is saying to the church, "Church, following the law is not the answer ... a religion that is about following the rules is dead." He says: Abram was not considered righteous by following the law. There was no law at the time of Abram. It was given through Moses much later. Instead, Paul quotes from Genesis 15 that *Abraham believed God*, and *that* was credited to him as righteousness. Being a Christian is not about do's and don'ts, but about grace through faith in God. It's important to remember that Paul was a good Free Methodist, um, I mean a Pharisee, before his Damascus experience. Paul knew all about the "values" of following Torah.

I thought about starting the homily with a little activity where I would give some traits, and you would guess if I was describing a Free Methodist—but coming right after the Gospel reading, I figured it would be too obvious what I was up to. But listen to these descriptors and see how many of them line up with what you think makes up a Free Methodist. Does a Free Methodist: follow the conduct of reason; have a high regard for the elderly; believe in the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body; believe in divine reward and punishment in the afterlife for human conduct; believe in practicing frugal living; have a diet that exclude delicacies; have a perception of fate that allows for the freedom of human will; normally live as a pacifist, but would fight if really necessary?

These are some of the traits of Pharisees that are outlined in "The Dictionary of Bible and Religion." The Pharisees were also experts in interpreting the Torah (the Law), and the Talmud (the oral interpretations of the law). It is popular to say that they "fenced in the Torah" with their many traditions and teachings so that they would not even come close to breaking God's law. I sometimes tell my students that this would be like them not even going to shop at IGA because IGA sells liquor and as underage GC students, they cannot buy it. In fact, perhaps they should not even go into the parking lot of IGA, because they might be tempted to go in the store. This is law, and I think that there is a place for rules and laws in our lives. But again, this concerns me about what Christianity can sometimes become, and has been at times in the FMC... rules upon rules. We worry—I worry—about things just like the Pharisees did, things like correct interpretations of the Scriptures (like I am some great expert) and can easily forget that what the message is about at its very core is God's love, grace and mercy for each of us.

I really appreciated the word we heard from BJ last week. Among other things, he reminded us that we all have had our own journeys to where we are at this place today.

As I think about our Gospel reading for today, I wonder about this Pharisee, Nicodemus, and his journey. I wonder why he came to talk to Jesus.

John 2 records the wedding at Cana where Jesus turned the water into wine, which John says was the first of the signs of Jesus. John 2 also includes the cleansing of the temple and Jesus' cryptic words to his disciples "Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days." Did the words and actions of Jesus catch Nick's attention? Why did he come at night? Was he afraid of who might see him? Was he worried about what other religious leaders might think?

While we may never know what fueled his investigation, Jesus used it as an opportunity to speak of mystery ... an invisible kingdom of God, a spiritual rebirth, and this one really important reminder to all of us that I will talk about in a minute.

The first verse that children often learn in their lives is in our passage today, and I do not want to downplay its importance. God so loved the world that God sent Jesus to grant eternal life, which for John did not just mean living forever, but meant a quality of life under God's dominion. In chapter 4, when Jesus talks to the Samaritan woman, he speaks of eternal life as a spring of life welling up within her. This eternal life is a present reality, the state of shalom that BJ talked to us about last week. Jesus continues to talk in verse 17 about the fact that he had not been sent by God to condemn, but to save the world.

This is the gospel in a nutshell for John; but I want to go back to verse 8 and mystery. Here we read that Pneuma blows where it wishes and we cannot control Pneuma. The Pneuma is translated here as both wind and Spirit. For me, I cannot afford to lose sight of what Jesus is speaking of as a great reality. Do I believe this mystery, that Pneuma is at work, moving in the world? Do I have faith in God, that God cares about who I am, who I am becoming, that God indeed wants to invite me into partnering in some way in living as an active and vital part of God's kingdom? Am I satisfied with following the rules of Free Methodism and interpreting the rules and judging those who do not agree with me? Or do I long for springs of living water to cleanse and energize my life? Do I believe in a living, active God who is ever doing new things?

I think it is most at that point in my life when I can begin to learn to pray confidently like the Psalmist—that even in my darkest days, I will lift mine eyes to the hills searching for God who is ever mysterious, but also ever breaking into time and space to touch our worlds and our lives ... the mystery of faith.