

In Face of Mystery

Text: Job 23:3; Romans 8:38-39

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Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
November 5, 2000

Transcription of the spoken sermon

Life is a mystery and we live this curious existence before the face of a Mystery, before the face of God, for God is Mystery. Beyond all of the images and all of the intuitions that we have, God is beyond all of that, and so, our human existence and the God of our life are all bathed in mystery.

Job, that epic poem that so powerfully presents the struggle of or the question of why the righteous suffer, in the passage read this morning, cries out, “Oh, that I knew where I might find God!” And how many of us haven’t cried the same at a time of crisis or a time of grief or a time of loss, a time of anxiety? “Oh, that I knew where I might find God!”

Paul, of course, knew the struggle, too, if you take the paragraph I read from the eighth chapter and put it in context, you would find that Paul was talking about the struggle in the seventh chapter, that famous passage about the flesh and the spirit, what he wills to do and what he ends up doing and who will deliver him. And then the eighth chapter talks about the spirit and about creation as though creation is bound and straining, yearning for release and freedom. And then he comes to that marvelous conclusion to the eighth chapter with the affirmation that nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Job, at the end of that passage I read, said, “When God has tried me, I will come forth.” There is the intense struggle with the mystery, the mystery of suffering or the mystery of loss or the questions of meaning, the intense struggle, and then the trust, the affirmation of trust in the teeth of the struggle, as it were, a resting finally in the love of God from which we will not be separated.

It seems that the mystery of life comes to its sharpest expression in that relationship of our body to our mind or our spirit. At that point of human consciousness, I become conscious that I am. I become conscious that I have a body. I am not a body, period. I am and I have a body, and I am not apart from the body. I become conscious of that mind, matter, dualism that marks my existence, and that is such a mystery.

This message for this day was spawned on the day I left my sister who died in August, left her for the last time, knowing that it might be the last time, and indeed, it turned out to be the last time. All the way home I kept thinking about the fact that here we talked together, we sat on the edge of her bed together, she was fully cognizant, fully alive, fully conscious. We could laugh together about family stories and weep together about the inevitable end, but there we were together in all of the normalcy of a human relationship, a family tie and bond, and as I left there knowing that it may well be the last time, I thought, "What a mystery." And sure enough, the next time I saw her was in the casket where the shell was there. I wouldn't have mistaken her ever. It was Lois. But not. The matter was there, the spirit was gone.

What happens when the spirit which doesn't exist apart from the matter, which is the host, ceases when the host ceases? We know from all sorts of studies and human experience that the matter, the body can be so racked with pain that it can drown the spirit. We know that the testimonies of drug addicts say that the tissues of the body can scream so loudly that the spirit is lost, it's captive, it's submerged, it's drowned. Those who deal in human torture tell us that every human being has a point at which torture will break the spirit. Torture applied to the matter can submerge the spirit. It's a mystery, isn't it?

I've been with people on a number of occasions at the moment of their last breathing and it's always different, of course, but where there is someone who is with you, conscious, cognizant, alive, and then in a moment gone - what a mystery. I think that you and I might have been given a sneak preview into where things are going in the future with that wonderful person in our midst last week, Huston Smith, who is probing the edges of that which lies beyond the possibilities and capability of science, suggesting from what has come to light in science itself that Spirit may not only be hosted by matter, but Spirit may generate matter. Thus matter is generated by Spirit, indwelt by Spirit, and, finally, Spirit departs the matter that was its host.

In the best of scientific probing and religious wrestling there is the possibility in our day that we may be coming 'round to where the dogmatisms of a rigid supernaturalism and the dogmatisms of a scientific reductionism may be transcended. In Huston's words, there may be "light at the end of the tunnel," where these two great human enterprises that have been in such adversarial relationship may be coming to a time when we will be able to at least give expression to that mystery that we are in the face of that Mystery that is God, and which will enable us to pursue the scientific endeavor with integrity, live with critical rationality, but also with a trust that is grounded in that reality, that we may come to see that spirit enlivens matter and then moves on in that cosmic journey, that evolutionary process to whatever lies beyond.

We may be coming to a point where these great human enterprises will enable us to not block out the light from any direction, but with good heart, with

intellectual integrity and human passion, to rest in the wonder that is life now and hope in that which is yet to come, a journey into the Holy One, into eternal light which would enable us with good heart to use the words of the poet, those we've loved and lost a while, those who have gone on before us, but in whose train we shall follow, for we move from light and life through death to light and life beyond our fondest dreams. Thanks be to God.