

Mystery Embodied

From the series: Aspects of God

Text: Exodus 25:8; 1 John 4:16; John 1:14

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

With the Pentecost storm, we had to move Pentecost up to a week later, which was Trinity Sunday, which made Trinity Sunday a week later, which meant that my series on Aspects of God would have three aspects collapsed into two. But, you can bet I'll get them all in.

Last week we spoke about that aspect of God as Mystery, the ultimate Mystery of everything beyond our knowing, beyond the possibility of our knowing. There was a phrase in one of our hymns this morning which spoke about the cloud of unknowing that comes from a Christian, mystic, medieval time. The cloud of unknowing. Entering into the cloud of unknowing is to experience God, Mystery, not in the sense that eventually we'll figure it out if we keep working at it long enough, but Mystery as that which is beyond human comprehension or the capacity of the human mind to get itself around.

Last week we talked about Mystery Experienced, because that ultimate mystery of everything is experienced. There is that seemingly universal human experience of the Ultimate, of that Mystery, that ultimate mystery that we cannot comprehend but yet which we sense, experience, which we say is none other than the breath of God or the Spirit of God, so, that Ultimate Mystery is experienced.

Today I want to say that that Ultimate Mystery has also been embodied. Last week we looked at Moses in that interesting story where he says to God, "Don't lead this people up if You won't go along," and God says, "I'll go along." Then, Moses, emboldened, says, "Show me your glory," and God says, "No way, Moses. You can't see my glory. That would blow you away. Get into this cleft in the rock and I'll put my hand over you and I'll pass all my goodness past you and you'll see my backside. But, you can't see my glory."

We also listened to the conversation between Phillip and Jesus where Jesus was talking about going to the Father and Phillip said, "Oh, just show us the father and we'll be satisfied." And Jesus said, "You don't get it yet. You can't see the

Mystery. You'll never penetrate the Mystery, but if you've seen me, you have seen the Father."

That is today's emphasis. That is the aspect I would stress today, and I want to say that every religion needs some concretization; every religion needs something to hang on to, something concrete, something to give that Mystery specificity and directionality.

The little child that was baptized in the beautiful little kimono - I was thinking about the Buddhist temple. The Buddhists understand that God is Mystery better than we could ever begin to, because their whole tradition is based on the idea of the void. God as the void. Emptiness. For them to try to put some concrete shape to that or some content to that is to deny the core of their religious understanding which is God as the emptiness or the void. But they need a temple, too, and they use beautiful little kimonos for children and they bless the children, and the temples are places for meditation because every human religion needs concretization.

The Incarnation of Jesus Christ and what the Christian tradition has done with it philosophically has been an offense to the Jews because Judaism at its core is monotheistic and it has seen in the deification of the son an idolatry mixing with God Who is absolute and ultimate. But, as a matter of fact, if we could stick to the New Testament data itself, there should not really be a problem for Judaism, because they themselves also recognize the need for that concretization, something that you can get your hands around.

Going back to the story of Moses, in that conversation on the mountain, God says, "Build me a *sanctuary*," the word that comes from the root word to mean holy. In other words, that which is set part. Create for me a sacred space. And do it in order that I may dwell in the midst of my people. And that word *to dwell* in Hebrew is really to pitch a tent, literally. And it's very interesting that in Exodus in the founding story of Israel you have the tension that was within Israel's faith all along. It is that tension between the need for the sense of the abiding presence of God and yet the refusal to say that God can become a permanent possession set in stone, that God can become domesticated by the cultic actions of a priesthood.

The freedom of God to be there was always guarded in Israel, and yet, they understood that God would dwell with them and they needed that tabernacle in their midst, that tent. God would pitch God's tent in the midst of the community in order that there might be a place for this Holy One Who was not just easily accessible, yet always there as a sign of the abiding presence of God, the constancy and the faithfulness of God, the God Who led them out of Egypt, the God Who would go through the wilderness with them, the God Who would bring them into the Promised Land. In the sixth century B.C. when they have been taken from their land and brought to Babylon and given up on God and lost their faith, some prophet comes to them and says, "Remember our founding story. Our

God is a God who is mobile and light. He pitches his tent. He goes with his people. God is here in exile as God was there in Jerusalem and the temple."

So, Israel, too, had that tangibility of God because we share with Judaism and Islam the idea of God as absolute Mystery, yet present in Spirit. But there is then this nuance that distinguishes Christian faith - it is that Mystery experienced spiritually is given a human face. It is that which makes Christian faith what it is. You could have a mystery and you can sense the mystery, but what is its nature? Or, what is the nature of God? It is so critically important that we have the proper conception of God because *the God we worship will shape the lives we lead*. Tell me who your God is and I'll tell you the kind of person you are. And I want to say this morning that that Mystery in our faith's story has been embodied because, just as God pitched a tent in the wilderness with God's people, so according to the Christian gospel, John now, the first chapter, that word that was with God, that created intention of God, became flesh in the face of Jesus Christ. (Jews writing now, as Jesus was a Jew.) That God Who dwelt in the midst of the people in a tent that was pitched in the wilderness now pitched a tent in human flesh, for the same word is used. The word was made flesh and dwelt among us. It could be literally translated, "The word was made flesh and tabernacled in our midst." God went camping. God in the tent, now the tent being the shape of a human person.

And there was no denying all of Israel's faith from which this little Jesus movement stemmed. They said the Torah came through Moses. The gift of Torah was a gift of God, a previous gift of God. But, grace and truth came to expression in Jesus. And those words, the words behind grace and truth are two of the most beautiful words in the Hebrew Bible - *hesed*, steadfast love, limitless mercy, and *emet* - truth, but better, faithfulness to covenant promises. In Jesus, says John, the God of Israel has taken the shape, the human form that has communicated the glory of God. That which Moses wanted to see has now become veiled in flesh, a tangible concretization of the nature of that mystery that we cannot fathom but which in the good pleasure of God has taken a shape, then given a face. So, the nature of the mystery is love. That's what a writer of the same Johannine circles concluded, the first letter of John, the fourth chapter. He says no one has ever seen God. That's always the problem, isn't it? "Just show us the father," says Phillip. "Show me your glory," says Moses.

The writer says no one has ever seen God. But God sent Jesus Christ, and on the basis of the sending of Jesus Christ, what came to expression there is that God is love. And, he says, "The one who abides in love, abides in God, and God abides in that one. He does not say "Abide in God," because how can we abide in God? We can't get a handle on that. What would we do, challenged to abide in God? But, to abide in love, to love one another, that's tangible and concrete. I can do that. And then, does he say, given the love of God, God so loved us, then we ought to love God? No. God, having so loved us, *we ought to love one another*. And miracle of miracles, when we begin to love one another, on the basis of that revelation which says that God is love and therefore, having loved us, we ought to love one

another, miracle of miracles, when we do that in relationship, in community, *God is there!* And the Mystery becomes experienced in a new and fresh way.

And if you want one more marvelous text from II Corinthians, third chapter, Paul says that where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom, and we, beholding as in a mirror the image of that face, are being transformed into that same image through the spirit of God.

You see, *the Mystery has been embodied*. The Mystery has a face and, beholding that face by the ministry of the Spirit of God, the breathing of the Mystery in us, we are being shaped into that same face. Because what the embodying of the Mystery is all about is to give us standards and norms by which to orient our lives. What the mystery of the Trinity is all about is very practical living. Beholding the face of Jesus and seeing therein that God is love, we are called to be a people who love, affecting therefore attitudes, determining our actions, suggesting those things to which we passionately commit ourselves. It makes all the difference in the world. This is our story. This is what it means to be in the Christian tradition. This is what it means to be in the Christian church.

It is to have that Ultimate Mystery of things experienced somehow inwardly, shaped and defined by Jesus, and following in the way of Jesus. Then, I believe, according to my story, that I am living with the grain of the universe, that I am living out in the practical arenas of my life the intention of God, because God is love. And that love, that mystery having come to expression in Jesus, shaping me into that image by the Spirit of God, gives me a way to go, gives me a way to live, it shows me what my values must be, it shows me that to which I must commit myself, that about which I must be passionate. This is down-to-earth, practical stuff.

What shapes our lives? What shapes our community? What kind of people are we? Are we people of love, people of grace, people full of mercy, people ready to forgive, people for reconciliation? Are we people who will love our enemies? That's what being Christian is all about. And it's all about that because in our story, that ultimate Mystery was embodied in Jesus who showed us the way.

I don't have any proof for that. I don't believe it because the church teaches it. I don't believe it because the Bible teaches it. I probably believe it because my mother and father believed it. I probably do believe it because I've found it here. I probably do believe it because my whole life has been lived in the Christian community. But, I don't believe it because my parents believe it. I don't believe it because the Bible teaches it. I don't believe it because the church affirms it. I believe it because, by God, it's true.