

“The Mystery”
Isaiah 60:1-6, Ephesians 3:1-12,
Matthew 2:1-12

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Do you like a mystery? My two oldest sisters love mysteries and so they've got bookcases full of mysteries. They're fun. A good who done it. And in some ways as we think about this season we're in, we think back on a mystery. We might have some idea about who done it in this case. We're fairly clear that it's about something God did. We think about what that was. As we think back on that I'm reminded, much like in a mystery, that everything seems to revolve around one event. And so as we celebrate this season we think about it all revolving around one event.

In some of the reading I've been doing a fellow who wrote a book called *The Black Swan* has made me think about how particular events can be so important for our lives. Some events seem to be more relevant in what we do than others, or have greater impact. I've been thinking about that for myself, and there's a lot of different events in my life that have great impact but two that come to mind are, first, getting married to Helen. I think that that is one event that happened at a particular time that has had great relevance for the rest of my life. The second event that I think about that took place at a particular time was when I felt the call and made the decision to go back to seminary. It changed my life.

Now, I could probably go through my life and look at all kinds of different events that had greater relevance than others. But it's clear to me that at least those two, among the many, had a lot of relevance for my life. So as we are thinking about this season, we're thinking back on one event that had greater relevance than many of the others. That's why we celebrate Christmas, is the importance of that particular event. I don't think anyone can deny that our view of that event, that event itself, has changed history. And I would suggest that for many of us it has changed our entire lives. It has clear relevance.

There is some mystery involved in it, some need to understand it. In Jesus' day there were what were called the mystery religions and those were places where people had felt that they had figured it out, that they had figured out the mystery of life particularly in relationship to the divine. And since they held the knowledge of that mystery, thus believed they held the way. Well, along comes Paul and Jesus and they suggest that there is some mystery to life. We certainly don't understand it all. But one piece of that mystery, our relationship to God, is not held by any one group of people that can initiate you into their particular way of understanding. In fact what Paul suggests is that as we notice all the clues that what we find is that the mystery becomes clear, that God is come for not only those who knew him before, or didn't know him—"insiders and outsiders" is the way Eugene Peterson translates it—but for everyone. That was part of the

mystery of Christ. The mystery people were trying to understand—how do we relate to God.

Perhaps part of the reason it starts out as a mystery for all of us is it makes it interesting. It draws us in. God also gives us clues. In fact this whole set of stories is a set of clues for us about what God has done and is doing. As I looked at it, I realized that different people see the clues in different ways. Perhaps some of us are like the shepherds. The clue is right out there in the sky singing to us. We have that experience of God's presence in the astounding way of having all the heavenly host before us. I'm not sure very many of us have quite that experience, but we might have something that approximates it, where we feel that God has entered our lives in a way that has gotten our attention. Some of us may be more like these wise men from the east who were at least paying attention to what was going on around them. And when they saw something happening they looked into it. They could see that God was up to something, and they went to find out what it was. And they found out and were awed that God had come.

When I first thought about it I thought maybe those are the two ways we encounter God. We notice what's going on around us, or we have an encounter with angels. But then I realized there was actually a third way. You know, most of us don't often have an experience of encountering the heavenly host, and I'm not sure I'm quite as observant as those Wise Men were. But I am very thankful for both of them because what they end up being are witnesses, clues, ways of helping me see what God has done and continues to do. The clue is to help me see what is truly relevant for my life, the way God has come in grace to give us grace. So that it's not a matter of a few people holding on the truth that they can dole out, letting in a few of the initiated. Rather it's God coming to say, "You're all welcome. Come." It also helps me see what happens if we do come. The wise men are my example in this case. They saw something, they felt invited, they came, and what did they do? They worshiped, they gave homage, they recognized they had encountered God, and then in that encounter they ended up listening. God spoke to them in a dream and they did what he said.

In many ways as we are drawn into the mystery of what God has done in Christ, he shows us that we're all welcome, that grace is for all of us. We're given clues along the way, we're given the opportunity to live into what that means—the grace of God, the love of God in our lives. And out of that, we, too, get to listen and find out where he would take us, which road we should travel, just as those wise men changed their route because they listened to God. It's interesting, as those wise men did that, as they became clues, as they became witnesses to us, what did they do? They simply came to God, encountered him, worshiped him, listened and then went the way he directed them. And they became our witnesses to what God has done.

I think God calls us to the same thing. As we recognize the answer to who done it, that God did it and what God has done in making the mystery clear is inviting all of us to be his, to gather in his family, we too listen, worship. As we do that, we allow him to guide us and then do what he calls us to do, we too become witnesses. Notice it is the story of the shepherds, it is the story of the wise men, it's the scripture itself which is the story laid out before us that witnesses to us. But that story doesn't stay just in the pages of the book. I see that story lived out in the lives of all those who follow Christ. We each become witnesses as we follow Christ. I think we probably can each think about our own lives and those stories we've encountered, those people we've encountered whose lives are a story of faith that are a witness to us. And so as we again encounter the mystery of Christ, the grace of God given, we may recognize the clues. The shepherds, the angels, Mary and Joseph, but also those people we encounter who have lived out that same story, a story of encountering the living Christ, and knowing the wonder of his grace and love invite us to become part of that story too, witnesses to the wonder of God's grace. Amen.