

Mystery

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Scripture: Ephesians 3:1-12

³This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— ²for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, ³and how the **mystery** was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, ⁴a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the **mystery** of Christ. ⁵In former generations this **mystery** was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: ⁶that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. ⁷Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. ⁸Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, ⁹and to make everyone see what is the plan of the **mystery** hidden for ages in God who created all things; ¹⁰so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. ¹¹This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹²in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

Proclamation of the Word

"Great is the mystery of faith. Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." Sometimes we sing or say these words as part of the liturgy at the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. "Great is the mystery of faith. Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again."

Mystery. Much of the time, we think of mystery as a C.S.I. crime show or Sherlock Holmes novel. A crime has taken place. Human reason, observation of clues, and deductions help the detective solve the mystery. In the end, the mystery is wrapped up neatly with a bow.

Paul speaks about Jesus Christ revealing the mystery of God. Mystery is mentioned no less than 4 times. God has revealed in Jesus something that was hidden before to most folks like us, Gentiles, non-Jews. We have been given access to God through Christ Jesus, God in the flesh.

Today we celebrate Epiphany, which was actually yesterday January 6 for the Christian church throughout the world. The Christ, the messiah, is revealed to visitors from the east who follow a star and find themselves first in the court of King Herod, who has proclaimed himself King of the Jews. To these outsiders and strangers who studied the stars, they are on a fishing expedition, a research trip of sorts. They are the scholars and academics of their day. Their interest in this child born in a manger is first a curiosity. They may not have been looking for a Savior, but they found him and worshiped the child. They are captivated by him. God reveals God's self to them. For them it was an epiphany.

Paul, a learned man of the Religious institution, who persecuted the Christ followers found himself knocked off his feet and blinded by a revelation of Jesus. Paul was fighting for orthodoxy, not seeking Jesus when Jesus found him. Paul has an epiphany. God reveals himself to Paul, and Paul is captivated, a prisoner for Christ, he calls himself. Paul is a man on a mission with a heart for sharing the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ for those formerly outside the covenant with Israel, the Gentiles. His epiphany changed his life and the lives of millions through those first missions.

Neither the wise men nor Paul could explain it all rationally, they could only witness to what God had done and help draw others into God's presence.

People of faith are comfortable with mystery, not the kind of mystery where it all finally makes logical sense, but the kind of mystery that is a loving relationship with a person, with God. Being captivated, compelled, as if your life depended on it. Such is faith- when it all becomes clear, yet paradoxically cannot be explained, only experienced, encountered.

When we celebrate that Great Mystery in the Lord's Supper today we will process forward. We don't process often, but when we do it reminds us of pilgrims for hundreds of years like those first magi who traipse to worship and adore the Christ-child. We come as an act of devotion and love, but also because we are caught up in the mystery of it all. Since last year we have more opportunities to come forward to receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. I have spoken with some of you who shared how meaningful it is to share Communion with the Body of Christ, the church, in this way. There is something beautiful about seeing the pilgrims walk forward, all of us rag tag band of disciples, who hunger and thirst for God's grace. There is something powerful about standing up oneself, presenting yourself, and reaching out to receive the gift of Christ himself. Processing forward towards the Cross, the Table, the Word made flesh, is both mystery and comfort.

Martin Sheen, the great actor and devout Catholic, told Krista Tippett (in his interview with her in *On Being*) how he felt about standing in line in worship. He says,

"How can we understand these great mysteries of the church? I don't have a clue. I just stand in line and say Here I am, I'm with them, the community of faith. This explains the mystery, all the love. Sometimes I'm overwhelmed, just watching people in line. It's the most profound thing. You just surrender yourself to it."ⁱ

There is mystery and revelation. Poets, musicians, artist have God-given gifts of helping us with mystery. As the poet Madeline L'Engle writes in her poem "First Coming"

*In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.*ⁱⁱ

We surrender to it, are captured by it. The mystery of God is made known in Jesus Christ. And through his church, through us, we are the presence of Christ on earth. God has reconciled Jew and Gentile,

and made his church a sign of the good news. Paul reminds us that Jesus, the Light of the World, is not only head of the Church, but head of the Cosmos- the heavens and earth, the stars and all of creation. God reveals his purposes and plans to the world which God loves, and so we rejoice!

We stand on the threshold of a new year. Think, for a moment, of all that will happen in the coming year – the decisions that will be made, relationships started (or ended), career changes, new schools entered, illnesses endured, challenges surmounted, risks taken, adventures dared, love shared. That is just on a personal level, not to mention what may happen in our world...with wars and rumors of wars, a record high in the markets, new public policies or decisions. So much will come down the pike in the coming weeks and months. Some of it we may anticipate and be prepared for, but much of it we simply can't imagine. Daunting, isn't it?

Until we remember that God is with us through all of it. God is on our side. God will not abandon us but will walk alongside us, strengthening us, encouraging us, granting us grace sufficient to become the people God wants us to be.ⁱⁱⁱ

So we process. We line up and we come to be fed on the grace of God for the living of these days. We get caught up, captivated even, by Jesus, the Word made flesh, come to walk with us and through it all.

When you come to the Table to be served today, you are invited to take a Star word- a gift for the new year.^{iv} Focusing on the word you receive is an Epiphany spiritual practice. We have done this many times in years past. The word you draw may immediately register for you and what you are dealing with or you may wonder what in the world does this word mean for me. One pastor shares that one year a woman received the word COURAGE even as she faced her own cancer diagnosis. She took her star with her to each doctor appointment. And when the news turned grim, she carried her star and that word COURAGE with her to the comfort of a Hospice house where she surrendered her life back into the Loving arms of a faithful God.^v

A couple of years ago, I drew the word LIGHTHEARTEDNESS . I placed it on my computer screen. As I lived through each day, that Star Word become a reminder to me to welcome the simple joys of each day, to not take myself too seriously, and to laugh. Chuck drew the word SUCCESS and placed it on the bathroom mirror- a reminder to thank God when successes come. So I invite you to be open to what God may be showing you, what God may reveal to you as you claim your word.

And as we come to the Table this day, let us recommit our lives into God's able hands asking what God might do through us for the sake of his Kingdom. For the mystery is revealed that Christ has died. Christ is Risen. Christ will come again in glory and yet, Christ is with us in this moment and this new year. Thanks be to God!

ⁱ Tippet, Krista, "Spirituality of Imagination with Martin Sheen" in On Being with Krista Tippet, December 16, 2015 onbeing.org/programs/martin-sheen-spirituality-of-imagination/

ⁱⁱ L'Engle, Madeline, "First Coming" in *The Ordering of Love: The New and Collected Poems of Madeleine L'Engle*. Waterbrook Press, 2005, p. 242.

First Coming

*He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace.
He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.*

*He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine. He did not wait*

*till hearts were pure. In joy he came
to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.*

*He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.*

*We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!*

ⁱⁱⁱ Lose, David, "Epiphany 1B; Powerful Words for a New Year"in the meantime, davidlose.net, January 4, 2018.

^{iv} for more ideas on Star Words, www.reformedworship.org/article/september-2009/star-gifts

^v Stroble, Kristin, "Star Words: A Spiritual Practice for Epiphany," in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, January 6, 2016.