

Ephesians 3:1-13

Psalm 139:1-12

"Mysterious Ways"

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In the past few weeks we've gone from Advent to Christmas to Epiphany, and now we are once again getting back to the ordinary, usual, post-holiday stuff. That can be a hard transition, and in my own house there has been considerable weeping and gnashing of teeth over the disappearance of Christmas. A.J. and Alex haven't handled it too well, either.

We've been putting all the decorations away when it seems like we just got them out. I think back on the past few weeks and it all seems like a blur. I can't figure out where Christmas went. Growing up it seemed like Christmas was this exciting, and magical, and mysterious thing that took *forever* to arrive, but now it seems as though it steals in quietly among the busy and frantic pace of December, and in the blink of an eye it's gone again. In our neighborhood there's a house right as you turn onto our street that has all kinds of Christmas lights and decorations in their yard, one of which is a light-up snowman that displays a clock that counts down the days, hours, and minutes until Christmas. And I have to

say I hate that thing. The day is coming when you'll read about me in the paper, though I will be referred to as "golf club wielding maniac", not Associate Pastor. Every Christmas Eve for the past few years I've gone home after our 11:00 p.m. worship service and stopped at the stop sign in front of that house to see the clock blinking - 00:00:00. And that's when it hits me that Christmas has come, and soon will be over, and I have done very little to slow down and enjoy the season. I've neglected to reconnect with the mystery and magic of Christmas that I cherished in my childhood.

This year, however, something happened. As I sat at the stop sign looking at that infernal snowman and his blinking zeroes, a song came on the radio. It happened to be my favorite Christmas hymn, one called *O Magnum Mysterium*. It's an absolutely beautiful piece of music. It's also a choral piece sung in Latin, so I don't really understand the words. Translated to English, the opening words say:

*O great mystery,
and wonderful sacrament,
that animals should see the new-born Lord,
lying in a manger!*

O great mystery... The famous protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote that proclaiming the Christmas event is something best left to the musicians, because any words we preachers say about it are bound to be inadequate. As I listened to *O Magnum Mysterium* sitting in my car on Christmas Eve, I knew what he meant. *O great mystery and wonderful sacrament.* Neither the snowman nor I had anything to say about that.

We now stand in the wake of an event so profound and mysterious that it cannot adequately be put into words. The very fact that God loves each of us living on this earth so deeply that he would come to us right where we are, that he would be born, and live, and die for us, is beyond incredible. In the Bible it takes not one, but four different gospel writers to tell the story, and each tells it differently. Mark doesn't mention Jesus' birth, focusing instead on his ministry, especially his suffering and death. John, rather than telling a birth story, begins with the familiar words:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into

being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Luke's gospel begins with the story of Jesus' birth, telling us that Jesus, our salvation, was born in a stable and placed into an animal's feeding trough. In Luke's gospel it is the lowly shepherds who first hear the good news. Matthew's gospel, which we heard last week, speaks of wise men from the east, foreigners who had no part in God's kingdom, coming to bring gifts and worship him.

Together the gospels tell us what Christmas - God's great mystery - was all about: Light shining in the darkness; Salvation for the world, particularly the poor and outcast; and God's ever-widening circle of grace, which encompasses not only Jews but Gentiles and many, many others who seem to have no business being among God's chosen people.

If you listen, you can hear God's great mystery in the words of our New Testament reading for this morning. There's nothing to suggest that Ephesians is a Christmas letter, but Paul picks up the same themes as he writes to the Christian community in Ephesus. He writes of salvation to the Gentiles, saying that they, the outsiders, have become "fellow-heirs, members of the same body,

and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." He writes of the church, saying that through us the "rich variety of God's wisdom" is made known to the world.

And he writes of mystery. Over and over again he employs that word, that notion of something greater than us that we simply cannot fathom. Clearly, God is at work in ways that we cannot understand. Whom God chooses, whom God brings in, whom God saves - those are all up to God, and God does as God pleases. One of the greatest blessings is that God doesn't check with us before God acts, or blesses, or loves. Salvation. Grace. Divine love. Those are God things, and we aren't mean to entirely understand them. On their deepest level, they are a great mystery.

Now when it comes to mystery, we don't do so well. Generally we want things to make more sense, not less. We want the picture to grow clearer, not more dim. We want there to be more answers than questions, and we want the things around us to make sense to us in a reasonable, measurable way. Paul has his work cut out for him if he's going to write to us about the mystery of God in Jesus Christ. That community in Ephesus to which we was writing was surrounded by mysterious things. When they looked into the sky

they saw a sun, moon, and stars that they did not comprehend. Today we know the composition of the sun; we can see a piece of the moon itself in a museum; we have names for nearly every star and know how far away each of them is from us. Similarly, when Paul calls the church a body, he's speaking of something mysterious and beyond comprehension in that day and age. Today we know a great deal about how each organ works, how to fix them when they break down, and how we control them for optimal health. To borrow terms from John's gospel, for first century Christians likening the birth of Jesus to "light in the darkness" would have been mysterious and wondrous. The only sources of light back then were the sun and fire, two things that were as dangerous as they were helpful, two things that were inherently uncontrollable. Today we control all the light around us with switches and timers - there's nothing mysterious about it, and in fact there's very little left to us that is mysterious and unknowable. There is very little that we have not reduced to a controllable, mathematical formula.

With that in mind, I think it's ironic, then, that it was Albert Einstein, who understood more about the inner workings of the

universe than just about anyone else who ever lived, who said, "The most beautiful and deepest experience [one] can have is the sense of the mysterious." Part of Einstein's brilliance was due to his recognition that at the heart of all that we see, even the tiniest of particles, there lies something mysterious and unpredictable. You might say that there is some reflection of God in all things.

Now it's not very popular to view God as mysterious and unpredictable. Usually it's more comforting to imagine a manageable God, one who fits into our neat preconceptions about how the world and the people in it work. Far too often we describe faith as something you believe, something you can put into words, and to some degree it is, but even more than that faith is simply trusting in the mystery of a God we cannot manage, understand, or control. Sooner or later in faith we run up against the mystery of God, and that can be a rather disconcerting thing.

However, it can be a really comforting thing as well. What must it have been like for those living in poverty in the first century to hear that the good news of Jesus' birth came not to kings, or rulers, or priests, but to lowly shepherds? What must it have been like for Gentiles, who had been told their whole lives that they were

unclean and did not belong among God's people, to hear that wise men, foreigners, were among the first to worship the newborn king. What must it have been like for those Ephesians who received Paul's letter to open it and read that even suffering can lead to glory? What must it have been like for them to read about God's all-encompassing mystery in Jesus Christ, who walked with them and widened the circle of God's blessing to include even those who were cast out?

There's certainly nothing in Ephesians that suggests it's a Christmas letter, but I like to think that it is. We know that Paul actually wrote the letter from prison, and I don't think it's by accident that in the most trying time of his life, Paul writes not about the law, or about absolute certainty, but the incredible mystery of God's grace. There's something comforting about reaching a point at which you have no choice except to turn everything over to God, and trust that even though you don't understand the how or the why of things, God does. And we've been promised that we will always have God's grace and love even when we don't understand them. Take comfort, brothers and sisters, for even in your most trying times, God is at work in you

and around you and through you... and God does work in mysterious ways. O great mystery, and wonderful sacrament, that we should see the new-born Lord lying in a manger!

Christmas is ended, this is true. But friends, take heart. Though the carols are silenced, the poor have heard good news. Though the trees have been put out on the curb, the outsider has been welcomed in among God's people. Though the stark ordinariness of our everyday life has returned, the mystery of God's gracious love in Jesus Christ never ends.

Thanks be to God. Amen.