

Advent 4 (B)
Pastor Ed Harkey

Romans 16:25-27
TLC, Keene, NH

*HEROES [aka Saints] OF THE SEASON:
The Eve of Thomas*

“With Eyes and Mouths Wide Open”

*“Now to him who is able to strengthen you ... to the only wise God
be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.”*

*“Doxological texts deserve doxological sermons.” (Craddock, et. al. Preaching
through the Christian Year, B, 25)*

Introduction

Just recently saw *Tenet* ... where you have some idea from the preview of what is going to happen ... but it is not until the film starts that you get a sense of the story as it unfolds ... where, it isn't until the end that everything becomes clear ... well, almost ... I'm a little slow ... it's going to take a couple of sittings!

ANOTHER POSSIBLE OPENING: A popular literary device is to begin the story with the end, or close to it, and then, go back, filling in the back story, bringing us to where the movie began - and then continuing and ending the story from that point. It's what Paul does for us on this 4th Sunday of Advent. He gives us a picture of the “mystery” revealed. And now, we are left to continue it through Epiphany, Lent & Easter, until we arrive again at this place in Paul's letter ... and of course, the Doxology: “He is risen!”

Main Thought: Dramas often seek to resolve things in about 40 minutes or less, but God uses His “long eyes” to accomplish His purposes. And only those, through faith in Christ, can comprehend the things of God. (Adapted from Messmann, *CPR*, 10:1, 20)

God doesn't keep secrets forever; and we're on the verge of a big one!

WHAT WAS A MYSTERY IS NO LONGER, WITH THE COMING OF
EMMANUEL.

Let us welcome Him with eyes and mouths wide open!

Amen.

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Solomon in the book of Proverbs 30[:17-18] writes:

“Three things are too wonderful for me; four I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a virgin.”

Longfellow would concur with that last point, when he writes:

“The men that women marry, and why they marry them, will always be a marvel and a mystery to the world.” (Michael Angelo)

All told, there are a number of mysteries noted in God’s Word.

- 1) Faith (I Timothy 3:9)
- 2) The mystery of how *“we shall not all sleep, but (at the resurrection) we shall all be changed.”* (I Corinthians 15:51f)
- 3) As to our text, the Incarnation and redemption of Jesus are shrouded in mystery (Romans 16:25; I Corinthians 2:7ff; Ephesians 1:9ff, 3:4ff; Colossians 1:27, 2:3, 4:3; I Timothy 3:16)

*“Great indeed ... is the **mystery** of godliness,”* Paul writes in 1 Tim 3:16: *“[Of] He [who] was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.”*

- 4) The judgments of God (Romans 11:33ff)

“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ³⁴ “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?”

- 5) The kingdom of God (Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10)
- 6) New birth in Christ (John 3:8ff)
- 7) The prosperity of the wicked (Psalm 73; Jeremiah 12:1)
- 8) The suffering of Christians (Hebrews 12:11)
- 9) The union of Christ and His Bride (Ephesians 5:25ff)

Wherein, someone once said that “mystery is another name for ignorance.” Perhaps ... especially in our fully grasping the ways of God. Yet, what the Lord *has revealed* to us in these latter days by His Son is enough! Where, one thing that is not a mystery any longer is how great the love of the Father is for this planet He created, and for each one of us individually. What is not a mystery any longer is that:

“God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life!” (John 3:16)

And that ...

“There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12)

Still, at times we come to waver in such a certainty. Me? I’m at times fickle, akin to Thomas – whose day is tomorrow ... though whom, sometimes gets unfairly singled out. Where, as Scripture bears out – in the midst of the uncertainty that, so often, marks this life – there are many whose faith has faltered, even though God demonstrated the glory of His power and promise: Abraham ... Gideon ... David ... Peter ... all saw the mystery of God’s promises revealed; and all also at times doubted them.

How about you? Yes, where are you on this 4th Sun. of Advent?

So often, we know God’s Word to be true. We’ve tasted and seen that the Lord is good. But, perhaps, on this Sunday before Christmas you may – like so many in our world – be struggling to “move beyond worldly worries and constraints into the joyful praise that God’s goodness and generosity evoke.”

Procrastination has gotten the best of you ... again. Fatigue and financial concerns weigh heavily on your mind. Grief seeks to overwhelm you as you face that first, fifth or fifteenth Christmas without a loved one. As we attempt to prepare to receive the Prince of Peace, our community and country seem filled with disease, dissension, discord and distress. (Adapted from Cathy Young, *Feasting on the Word*, B, 1, 86)

Paul's doxology rouses us once again to faith. Here, that single sentence is chocked full of promise, God re-grounding us in His plan of salvation ... and not a moment too soon!

*"Now to **him** who is able to strengthen you ...*

Yes, only He can shoulder such an undertaking. How?

*"According to my gospel [the Good News] and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the **mystery** that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed, and through [according to] the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God ..."*

O child of God, marvel at such a God! Marvel at such grace, even now, coming to us in full measure. God loves you still. Where, in and through His Emmanuel – "God with us" – our heavenly Father has "bridged the chasm that human sin created, [all] so that we can live in relationship together [with Him]." (Young, 88)

Yes, let "the puny minds of men ... dissect and discard direct divine revelation in the Bible as so much human baggage and ballast." Let this world continue "to crave to find truth through subjective human experience, when God has chosen to reveal it through ... the proclamation about Jesus Christ." (*Sermon Studies on the Epistles*, B, 27) He – who was once hidden – has now been fully revealed ... through God's Word of Good News regarding Jesus the Savior.

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To what response?

Such mysteries of God's grace are always, first, to be prayerfully pondered: like the mystery of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us ... or the mystery of the Trinity ... or the mystery of Christ's presence in His body and blood poured out for the sins of many ... or the mystery of how simple words on a page can effect life and salvation for all who believe them. Awe should always be our first response to the in-breaking of God into our lives.

Followed closely by the response of sheer joy ... that God in His grace would lavish such gifts upon us ... a people unworthy of such things, but who are made worthy by the blood of Christ, all, says Paul *“according to the will and command of the eternal God.”*

The story is told about two wives who were doing their laundry in a laundry mat. They were both mending their husband’s pants.

One wife said, “My husband is so miserable. Nothing goes right at work, and he can’t find anything good on television. Our home is a place of despair. When we go to church, the song leader is terrible and the pastor is an idiot.”

The other wife said “My husband is so excited. He can’t wait to go to church. He loves the sermons. We laugh all the time and enjoy our family.”

It got very quiet in the laundry room as the women continued sewing the pants. Where one could be seen patching the seat of the pants, while the other was patching the knees.

Massena, one of Napoleon’s generals, suddenly appeared with eighteen thousand men before an Austrian town which had no means of defense. The town council had nearly decided to surrender when the old dean of the church reminded them that it was Easter and begged them to hold services as usual and to leave the trouble in God’s hands. This they did; and the French hearing the church bells ringing joyfully concluded that an Austrian army had come to relieve the place and quickly broke camp. Before the bells ceased ringing, all the Frenchmen had vanished.

The incident has often been duplicated in individual lives. They have rung the joy bells in the face of pain, and sickness, and poverty, and fear, and loneliness, and all other trials. Then the joy bells have conquered. Speedily, the foe has slunk away. Speedily, the bell ringers have found themselves in possession of the field. For no enemy is quite so strong as faith accompanied with good cheer.

“Joy,” someone once said, “is the flag which is flown from the castle of the heart when the King is in residence there.”

Where, finally, let this mystery of God’s grace, now revealed, bring you, child of God, to hope. Where, perhaps, this week before Christmas, you find yourself stuck between where you want to be, and where you are.

Yes, instead of finding yourself in awe, you are bound up by “worldly worries and constraints.” Instead of joy, you find yourself fatigued or faced with financial cares or concerns. Instead of a willing obedience, you are stuck in despair or distress over a world, such as it is, that for all the fanfare doesn’t give one wit about your resolve. Let God’s Word and precious Sacrament once again revive you. Here, in Paul’s doxology, we are reminded of the ultimate reason for any awe, joy, obedience or hope we may experience. No simple gift will do. Only God’s Light wrapped in love. And that, is no mystery!

Conclusion

One of our favorite shows on TV is “Masterpiece Mystery,” celebrating a significant anniversary this year. Why do we like them so? Is it the suspense? Is it that they often capture the worst of our own stories, and then bring them to a timely resolution?

“Mystery? Who did it? How was it done? Now we know. God planned all along to rescue us by sending His only-begotten Son to the cross. Thank you, Lord, for revealing it to us. Glory to God!” (Brauer, *CJ*, October 2005, 440)

“The final Sunday of Advent calls us to focus on what is most important. In a world that too often seems random and fraught with pain, it is not the presents we can touch that matter. Christ’s birth reminds us of God’s eternal gifts: radical hope, faith-filled trust, inner joy, and redemptive love [all centered in a baby born to us in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord]. To God, through [this Savior] Jesus Christ, may all glory, praise, and honor be given.” (Young, 90)

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