

### Called into Mystery

Sometimes it takes a surprise—something unexpected—to catch our attention. We so easily can fall into a comfortable routine where we know what to do, when to do it, and how to do it. And for a lot of the time, if not most of the time, we kind of like that predictability. It makes it easy to plan and anticipate. It minimizes stress and can keep us on an even keel. In fact, many people strive to achieve this smooth sailing and uneventful routine. However, if we're not careful, this routine can lead in the extreme to a mindless going through the motions where we can begin to feel like we're stuck in a rut. And I don't know anyone who's goal it is to get stuck in a rut.

It's why then that something unexpected that rocks the routine and that shocks us out of complacency, shakes us awake and alerts us to something new. And sometimes that which catches us most is that which cannot be easily explained. Sometimes the unexplainable, the bizarre, the mysterious is what not only catches us by surprise, but it also intrigues us to divert our attention going forward.

Over the course of a year, there are a number of times that we in the church recall and reflect on events in the life of Jesus that have an air of mystery about them. There are at least three major such events, as well as a couple of others that are not as well known. In each case, the event is a turning point in the story, and it is a turning point in the life of faith as we observe them.

The two most obvious such events are Christmas and Easter—the beginning and the new beginning. The Christmas story is shrouded in mystery. From the encounters with angels to revelations in dreams that Jesus' earthly parents experienced, mystery and the awe and wonder that follow are part of what makes this event so powerfully meaningful in the walk of faith. The big kahuna in the Christmas event is the most mysterious of all—that of God taking on human flesh and becoming one of us, alongside and among us. For us to boldly proclaim that Jesus is fully human and fully divine calls for us to embrace a full measure of mystery. And when we do, this begins the Christian life. The birth of Jesus is the start of the focus on Jesus' life and ministry and the meaning that has for us, the followers of Jesus. Without the mystery, the Christmas story would be nothing more than a cherished old folktale.

And if there isn't enough mystery in the Christmas event, there is even more in the Easter event. Easter is all about life—the life that is in Jesus' body after he had experienced a horrific and humiliating death by crucifixion, and the life that is in Jesus' resurrection that is of such a magnitude that the power of death in the life of faith is destroyed. The depth of God's love is further revealed in Jesus' triumph over death itself, in the resurrection that is so deeply profound that it is promised to us as well.

The big two—Christmas and Easter—are fully immersed in mystery. So even for those who only worship in the church on Christmas and Easter—they're affectionately called "C and E Christians"—have picked the two right days if worship is going to be so severely limited.

But there is a third big day that rounds out the other two. It is the one that has enabled us to hear about the other two all these 2000 years later. It's one that Jesus promised before he left the scene. I'm talking about Pentecost. It's that day, 50 days after Easter, that the followers of Jesus were mysteriously and miraculously transformed from a bunch who were scared and shaking in their boots behind closed doors, to a committed corps of preachers, evangelists and ministers ready to take on the whole world. It's the Pentecost story that is literally filled with smoke and flames as described in the

Bible. Flames came to rest on each of the disciples, flames that empowered each of them to begin a whole new life of sharing the good news of Jesus for the rest of their lives. We have those followers of Jesus aflame with the Spirit to thank for sharing and passing along their faith that has crossed the centuries to those of us here today.

Each of these big three moments of mystery—encounters with the Holy—marked the beginning of something new. Christmas is the beginning of the life of Jesus. Easter is the beginning of new life in Christ. And Pentecost is the beginning of what we call the Christian church. What a blessing that those who were there to experience the awe and wonder of the mystery of God were moved to embrace the mystery even if they couldn't fully understand it.

There are several other places along the course of the life of Jesus where mystery enters the story. Every one of Jesus' miracles certainly are right up there in catching people's attention with the unexpected—turning water into wine, healing the sick, restoring sight to the blind, feeding the hungry are all such examples. And they do indeed add to the winsome character of Jesus who became increasingly attractive as more and more joined in following him along the way.

There are two events in Jesus' life where part of the mystery is a voice that is heard by those present in which it is God declaring that Jesus is his beloved Son. The first time is at the outset of Jesus' public ministry when he is baptized by John the Baptist. It is from his baptism that Jesus begins what will be his 3-year ministry. The second of these mysterious events in which the heavenly voice of God is heard is in what is called the Transfiguration. It is from this mountaintop that Jesus' begins the second part of his ministry as he sets his sights on Jerusalem, where he will eventually face his own mortality as he goes to his death on the Roman cross of crucifixion.

Of all of the events shrouded in mystery in the Christian story, it is perhaps the Transfiguration that is the hardest to get our heads around. That's because it is all mystery, from start to finish. As Jesus began to turn his attention toward his journey that will end in Jerusalem, he took just three of his disciples with him, Peter, James and John, on a special walk apart from the rest of the entourage of disciples. He led them up a high mountain. It was on mountaintops where others before Jesus had holy encounters with God. And so it was that day when the four of them got to the top of the mountain. Upon their arrival at the top, Jesus himself took on a totally new appearance—dazzling white—whiter than white had ever been seen by the three disciples. Surely they were startled. Surely they were unprepared for what they were seeing. And therefore surely there was an element of fear in that moment. But before fear could seize them they realized that the four of them were now six with the addition of the two heavenly beings of Elijah and Moses who were seen talking to Jesus in his own radiance.

What an odd sight that must have been for Peter, James and John. By this time in their life with Jesus they had been startled again and again by the things Jesus did and the things that Jesus said. By this time they were probably getting used to being surprised. But nothing would have prepared them for this encounter with two of the great figures in the history of God's people. Some have noted that Moses represented all of the Law of the Hebrew people, and Elijah represented all of the prophets in the history of the people of God. The three disciples in recognizing Moses and Elijah surely would have seen how Jesus is not just a continuation of what had begun in the law and prophets but even a culmination of them.

You gotta bless Peter's heart when his mouth gets ahead of his head. He's just smart enough to know that something really important is happening. He just doesn't know the details. So in his being

terrified, rather than observe in silence, he jumps the gun and suggests that they erect some sort of structures that will ensure that what is happening with this heavenly triumvirate will continue. No sooner are the words off his lips, when the dazzling brightness is overshadowed with a thick dark cloud that completely changes the mood and silences Peter.

It is from that thick cloud in which nothing can be seen that the visual becomes aural as a voice is heard to be saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" A final sudden change happens when the cloud lifts, and as it all comes back into focus, it's just the four of them: Jesus, Peter, James and John. And Jesus, back to his old self, says nothing except that as they began descending the mountain that they should tell no one about what they had seen "until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead."

Those three disciples must have been as puzzled as ever by what they had experienced. And because they could not talk about it openly, they were left to ponder the meaning and significance of it all as they lived out the story with Jesus in the coming events of his life and ministry. The only clue that Jesus gives them is almost as mysterious as the event itself when he talks about the Son of Man rising from the dead.

As is always the case when we're reading about the various events in Jesus' life, we have the advantage of knowing how the story ends. We know that Jesus will make his way to Jerusalem. And we know that when he does, all is not good. In fact it all goes south when Jesus is arrested, tried, found guilty and sentenced to death by crucifixion. And of course we also know that that is not the end of the story either. For we know exactly what Jesus meant when he talked about the Son of Man being risen from the dead.

Does that mean that we fully understand the mystery that pervades the Transfiguration event? No, it doesn't. But one of the most important things we do know is that as the other mysterious events that are not fully understandable lead to a deepening of our faith, so too is answering the call into the mystery that surrounds it.

This coming Wednesday is the beginning of the season of Lent which is that 40-day period leading up to Easter Sunday. During these six weeks, we have the opportunity to take the time to ponder the mystery of God's love for us that is so great that not only was Jesus given to us in Christmas, Jesus turns around and gives us the promise of new life in the miracle of Easter.

Every year, Lent is an opportunity to journey with Jesus. As we do that again this year we'll be answering the call into the mystery of all that Jesus has done, is doing, and will do for us in this life and in the life to come.