

## Holy Mystery

Based on Exodus 33:17-23, 1Thessalonians 1:1-6, Matthew 22:15-22

Many of us enjoy mystery stories. I remember as a young person reading the “Hardy Boys” and “Nancy Drew” and watching “Scooby Doo” cartoons, “Perry Mason” or “Murder She Wrote”. As I aged, I moved on to other writers such as Agatha Christie, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, James Patterson and John Grisham. Both my mother and her father loved to read mysteries and to try to figure out “who done it” prior to the author revealing that answer. I guess that the acorn didn’t fall too far from the tree. My mind has always loved the discipline of detailed observation, of careful review of the data presented, of looking for associations between seemingly disparate pieces of information. The pursuit of the answer in reading mystery novels and watching those types of TV shows helped to form the inquisitive mind that I brought to solving medical problems and ultimately to my ministry with all of you.

No matter whether you like mystery stories or not, we are all involved in a mystery – a holy mystery. Whenever you read and study the Bible, enter into prayer, into fasting, into the sacraments of Holy Communion or Baptism, into Holy Conferencing, you are engaged in a mystery. Why is this? Well, it is because we can no more explain how God is present to us in the common items of bread, juice and water, than most of us can explain String Theory or Quantum Mechanics. Sixteen hundred years ago, Augustine of Hippo stated that if we believe that we understand God, it is not THE God that we understand. He was right then, and even with all of our

sophisticated knowledge of worldly things, we are no closer to solving the holy mystery of God and God's grace poured out in our lives and world.

Our scripture readings for today offer us some glimpses of the holy mystery of God and of God's actions. The letter we know as 1Thessalonians is Paul's earliest letter to one of his church plants. This letter was written somewhere in the early 50's (perhaps 51 CE) and is our first view of Paul's theology and teaching. In the opening, Paul is commending the believers for their good works "produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ". All of this made possible not by their own energies, but by the power of the mysterious yet ever-present and joyful Holy Spirit. Even "in the midst of severe sufferings" the believers in Thessalonica remained true to the gospel of Jesus. Speaking of Jesus, our Gospel reading for today has him mystifying the Pharisees, their disciples and some Herodians. Once again, the Temple leadership is trying to trick Jesus into saying something chargeable under Roman law. He understands their hearts, however, and does not take the bait. Instead, he mystifies them that telling them that coins made in the image of Caesar belong to Caesar, but people made in the image of God belong to God.

Moses and God are interacting at the new "tent of meeting" which Moses has erected outside of the Israelite encampment. Moses asks for the LORD's presence to continue to be with the Israelites, even though they have sinned against God. God assures Moses that God's presence will be with them, and that God will give Moses' soul rest. Moses also asks to be able to see God's glory. God says that all of God's goodness will pass by Moses, but Moses will not see God's face – instead, Moses can

view God's back after God has passed. God tells Moses that God will have mercy and compassion on people as God chooses – what a mysterious statement!

So many unknowns about how God is at work in our lives – so many mysteries. When the New Testament books were written, the authors used a form of the Greek language known as “biblical Greek”. It was a higher language than that which was spoken in everyday life. In that language, the word for a sacred secret was the word *Mysterion* (moos-ter-ee-on), where we get our English word “mystery”. Strong's concordance defines the word *Mysterion* in this way: “of God: the secret counsels which govern God in dealing with the righteous, which are hidden from ungodly and wicked people [men] but plain to the godly”. This adequately covers much of what we don't understand about contents of the Bible – and the saying of Jesus. We need to have the help of God to reveal to us the understanding of all that God wants us to know. The presence of the Holy Spirit counsels us and opens our minds. It reveals to us the ever-present love of God and allows our minds to grasp that there is more to life than what we can touch, taste, hear, smell and feel.

God's grace, another holy mystery of how God's love is constantly poured out on us, provides the rest of what we need to be transformed into the mind and heart of Jesus – to know salvation in this life. John Wesley taught that God's grace is unearned and that we were not to be idle waiting to experience grace, but we are to engage in the means of grace. The means of grace are ways God works invisibly and mysteriously in faithful people, hastening, strengthening and confirming faith, so that God's grace flows in and through them. Means of grace are divided into works of piety and works of mercy which happen both at the individual and community level.

Works of Piety are: individual practices such as reading, meditating and studying the scriptures, prayer, fasting, regularly attending worship, healthy living, and sharing our faith with others. There are also works of piety that are communal practices such as: regularly partaking in the sacraments, Christian conferencing (accountability to one another), and Bible study. Works of Mercy consist of individual practices such as: doing good works, visiting the sick, visiting those in prison, feeding the hungry, and giving generously to the needs of others; and communal practices such as seeking justice, ending oppression and discrimination (for instance Wesley challenged Methodists to end slavery), and addressing the needs of the poor.

These works of piety and mercy are “means of grace” where through our intentional practices we can encounter the holy mystery that is God and allow God to work through us to attain God’s desired outcomes in our part of the world. Yet, no matter how often I engage in the means of grace, I find myself wondering if God’s grace will allow me the kind of relationship that God had with Moses. Spiritual writer, Kerry Hassler-Brooks offers us this reflection on that holy mystery writing, “...I now lean into God’s mystery in a way that I could not when I was younger. Armed with the catechism I learned in my childhood church, the apologetics of C. S. Lewis and others, and my own inquisitive and deeply rational way of thinking, I wanted to know and to defend my God and my faith. Every question had to be answered, and so my personal relationship with God was deeply tied to my defensible knowledge of God. I acknowledged the mysteries of God but did not lean into them.

Today, however, the unknowable, unseeable, unsayable aspects of God are a profound part of my intimate sense of being in relationship with God. The very fact that I

do not have a tidy answer to every question, that nuance and paradox and doubt and revision abound, tethers me intimately to a God who I both know and will never fully know. The imagery of Exodus 33 confesses this coupling of intimacy and mystery. The unseeable God reaches out to the unseeing man and covers him with God's own hand. This is an intimate and protective laying of hands, a loving touch on Moses's head, at the very same time as God's back is turned from Moses' eyes. God's mystery is, here, an intimately felt thing...."

The whole of the Bible tells us repeatedly that God is way more than we will ever comprehend, and yet God is approachable and wishes to have a deep and abiding relationship with us. We do not have to find answers to the holy mystery that is God, we just need to act like Jesus, Paul, Moses, the Disciples and countless people throughout history and get to work in the means of grace. To use the inquisitive mind that God has given us to spend time with scripture, in Holy Communion, working with each other to visit those who are in need – and to do what we can to meet those needs. That is where we will experience the holy mystery of the intimacy of God. God's hand will guide and comfort us, God's Holy Spirit will give us the words to speak and the endurance to continue. The holy mystery of God is that the more we engage with God the more God will reveal God's-self to us. Let us engage with holy mystery to experience fully and share widely the love God has for each and all of us. Amen and amen!