

# Embracing the Mystery

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## Job 38:1-21

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind: <sup>2</sup>“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? <sup>3</sup>Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

<sup>4</sup>“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. <sup>5</sup>Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? <sup>6</sup>On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone <sup>7</sup>when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? <sup>8</sup>“Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?— <sup>9</sup>when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, <sup>10</sup>and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, <sup>11</sup>and said, “Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped”?

<sup>12</sup>“Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place, <sup>13</sup>so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth, and the wicked be shaken out of it? <sup>14</sup>It is changed like clay under the seal, and it is dyed like a garment. <sup>15</sup>Light is withheld from the wicked, and their uplifted arm is broken. <sup>16</sup>“Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? <sup>17</sup>Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? <sup>18</sup>Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare, if you know all this. <sup>19</sup>“Where is the way to the dwelling of light, and where is the place of darkness, <sup>20</sup>that you may take it to its territory and that you may discern the paths to its home? <sup>21</sup>Surely you know, for you were born then, and the number of your days is great!

## 1 Corinthians 4:1-2

Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries. <sup>2</sup>Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.

It was early in my first semester of seminary when I decided that the professor in my Intro to Theology class did not know what he was talking about. In one of our first sessions, the professor looked out over our class of budding seminarians -- all above average, as Garrison Keillor might say -- and he told us that the Trinity was a “mystery.” It was then that I decided this professor -- now the president of the seminary, incidentally -- just did not have enough confidence in himself, or perhaps in our class. What a cop-out, what a dereliction of his duties as an educator! Surely, if we put our heads together, we -- all

exceedingly bright first-year seminarians -- could wrap our heads around this issue and figure it out. After all, we were there to begin work on our Master of Divinity degrees. Before long, we students would have *mastered divinity*. Surely, we could tackle a little issue like the Trinity and explain it, once and for all.

I quickly learned that I had much to learn.

My first degree is in Computer Engineering Technology. I am a techie. I started writing computer code when I was in second grade. I am also what my grandmother used to call a "tinkerer." I like to get inside of things and figure them out, to take things apart and see if I can put them back together again. When I started seminary, I initially applied that same mindset to theology. *Let's take this apart, figure it out, and put it back together again!*

That class was the true beginning of my theological education -- the beginning of my understanding of mystery. As it turns out, and as most of you probably figured out long before I did, God is *not* a machine which we can take apart and look at the individual components and figure out what does what. God is the creator of us all. The created cannot fully comprehend its creator. We cannot wrap our finite minds around an infinite God.

It may be that I was not the only one with such a view. In our post-modern age, with all of the discoveries of science, perhaps we have begun to believe that there are few mysteries left, including when it comes to our study of God. Presbyterians are known, in general, and perhaps this church is known, in particular, for the value we put on knowledge. Even today, the Sunday School teachers for our children are undergoing teacher training, so that they can be even better at the task of Christian education for the youth of our church. And all of that is a good thing, a *very* good thing. I'm humbled to stand at this pulpit in front of such an intelligent group which embraces knowledge. At the same time, however, I believe scripture teaches us that we should equally value the embrace of mystery. We live in a world which has shown us negative consequences of religious certainty -- ranging from the Westboro "church" picketing funerals with their assertions of who God hates to ISIL's acts of terror. When you have certainty that you have it all figured out, it doesn't leave room for those who might disagree. An appliance repairman at my house a few weeks ago challenged me on my beliefs and how certain I am about them. In his eyes, I was seen as not a very good Christian when I said that I have learned to leave some of the absolute certainties to God, aware that I just might have some things wrong. He assured me that he was 100% certain about what he believed, and proceeded to tell me exactly where I was wrong.

Even when the result is not acts of hatred or terror or even just being obnoxious, sometimes we Christians have the tendency to reduce God into our buddy, as in the movie

Dogma's icon of Buddy Christ, with a wink and smile and a thumbs-up. A bit more scholarly way of saying this is given by noted preacher Tom Long: "God is not seen as the *mysterium tremendum*, an awesome and holy presence approached in humility with eyes shielded and shoes off; God is viewed as the loquacious next-door neighbor, always in a rocker on the porch, always near, always accessible, always wanting to talk, and always eager to be *known*."<sup>1</sup>

What happens with a too-familiar, too-certain view of God? I think God might respond with what we see God saying to Job, some of which we read this morning: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding." This continues on for a couple of chapters with God taking Job on a tour of creation, asking Job where he was when God was doing all of this. God assures Job that God is sovereign, not Job; God created the heavens and the earth, not Job.

I like contemporary Christian artist Steven Curtis Chapman's song called "God is God." He sings:

God is God and I am not  
I can only see a part  
Of the picture He's painting  
God is God and I am man  
So, I'll never understand it all  
For only God is God

Paul says that we are "stewards of the mysteries of God." To be clear, Paul is actually speaking of mysteries which God *has* revealed. Paul is saying that he and Apollos -- and I think, by extension, disciples down to today -- must properly hold on to and explain the mysteries which God has revealed. The world to which Paul was writing was quite influenced by pagan religions and Greek philosophers known as "Gnostics" who believed that there were secrets which had to be known in order to be saved. Those secrets were revealed in special ceremonies and rituals, not given to the general public. When Paul wrote that there were "mysteries of God" his readers likely had in mind such hidden truths. However, the truth Paul speaks of here is revealed truth. These mysteries belong to God, rather than to humans, and their revelation comes directly from God, not from rituals and ceremonies.

And yet, I think that there are still plenty mysteries of God today which are not fully revealed to us. Paul wrote later in this same letter "we know only in part, and we prophesy

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Long, *Preaching From Memory to Hope*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009), p. 79.

only in part.” He wrote “we see in a mirror, dimly.” We do not understand it all now. Later in Steven Curtis Chapman’s song, he sings:

Oh, how great are the riches of His wisdom and knowledge  
 How unsearchable, for to Him and through Him  
 And from Him are all things  
 So let us worship before the throne  
 Of the one who is worthy of worship alone

This is the proper attitude we should bring before God. If God is something we are able to wrap our minds around, to fully grasp, to understand intuitively, then that is not a God worthy of worship. Only an omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent God is worthy of our worship.

Paul goes on in chapter thirteen to say that our lack of full knowledge will cease one day. For now, we only understand in part. When we are face to face with God, “the partial will come to an end” and we will no longer see as in a mirror.

For now, though, we understand only a part of what God is doing in our lives and in our world, and our proper perspective and attitude towards God, towards others, and towards ourselves should reflect that reality. We do not have it all figured out. The Trinity *is* still a mystery, one which we will never fully grasp. God *is* still the creator and we are still the creation, and those truths will always remain. We can -- and should -- spend our lifetimes exploring the mysteries of God, but that will never be enough time for us to fully understand God, and that is the way God set up the world. The 55th chapter of Isaiah has these words: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” Earlier in Isaiah, he sees a vision of God sitting on a throne in a temple, with just the *hem* of God’s robe filling the temple. There are six-winged seraphs attending to God, and they are singing “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” Isaiah sees how he compares to God: “I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” One of the seraphs touches his lips with a live coal and tells him that this has taken away his guilt, and then God asks who will go out to speak God’s word. Isaiah responds: “Here am I; send me!”

Isaiah goes out to be a steward of the mysteries of God. He goes forth to speak of what he knows of this God who is holy other, but he will never understand all there is to know of this holy and awesome God. We will never fully understand God, and we shouldn’t expect to. This is not to say that we shouldn’t grow in knowledge and understanding of God, God’s Holy Word, and how God is moving in the world today. We absolutely *should* strive for

greater knowledge and understanding, but we should always do so with the proper perspective that “God is God, and I am not.” In this congregation’s current time of discernment about God’s will for our future, about the paths that God would have us to take, it is important that we retain this perspective. If we understand that God is God and we are not, then we will remember to, as Proverbs tells us, “Trust in the LORD with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take.”

Paul says in 2 Corinthians that we walk by faith, and not by sight. When we are certain about something, faith is no longer necessary. We live in this tension where we work to gain knowledge, always with the understanding that we will only know in part about this God who is holy mystery. This is a God who answers Moses with what is essentially a riddle. God calls Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery. Moses asks God what God’s name is, so that he can tell the Israelites. God responds “I am who I am,” a phrase which is perhaps better translated “I will be who I will be.” Either way, it’s not much of a name. It doesn’t let Moses into God’s essence. It is a name which furthers the mystery, which makes sure Moses understands his place in the situation. It is a helpful reminder for us all, *God* is the great “I am.” *We* are stewards of the mysteries of God. God is holy, other, mystery, always beyond our comprehension, always worthy of our worship and praise.

Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message* paraphrase of the Bible, among many other books, said “We inhabit a mystery. We must not pretend to know too much.”<sup>2</sup> Or, a classic Peanuts cartoon puts it like this: Snoopy is on the roof of his doghouse, typing away. Charlie Brown says “I hear you’re writing a book on theology. I hope you have a good title.” Snoopy responds, “I have the perfect title: ‘Has it Ever Occurred to You That You Might Be Wrong?’” Jesus said, “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8). The mystery is always present, and it is our task to try to understand a bit more each day.

I learned quite a bit while in seminary, but one of the key things I learned was to embrace mystery -- not simply to accept that there were things I wouldn’t ever having a chance to learn, but to be grateful that God was, by design, beyond my comprehension. I wanted to fully understand God, but I learned that a God that I can fully understand is no God at all. It is really quite nonsensical to think that I can wrap my finite mind around the infinite, eternal God, and I’m now not just OK with that realization, but happy with it. God is a mystery, and that’s good. I’ve learned to treat God as a mystery, rather than as a puzzle.

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<sup>2</sup> *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology*, Eugene Peterson, pg. 120

Theologian Justo Gonzalez once said, "Trinity is a mystery, not a puzzle. You try to solve a puzzle, you stand in awe before a mystery."

Let us stand in awe before the mystery of our God. Let us seek to understand what God reveals to us, while at the same time embracing the mystery of a holy God. Amen.