



Sunday, December 20, 2020

The Mystery Is Disclosed

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Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Romans 16:25-27

Every Advent, as we put up our Christmas tree, we talk about what we are doing, and we remember fondly those who have been part of our lives, through many Christmases past. This ornament may remind us of a great-grandparent. Another may remind us of a special friend or neighbor. Another may clearly show that tiny hands made it many years ago. The ornaments come from all time periods; some are gorgeous, and some are very homely to the untrained observer — unless you know their story.

Our Scripture passage today is about knowing the story — about God disclosing what would otherwise be a mystery. So let us, for a moment, look at a few ornaments from God.

One: As much as we might like to know everything, it does not seem to be God's way to tell us everything.

Maybe we could not handle knowing everything. Maybe there is a reason that what we are told comes in small doses. Maybe, if we looked at the sweep of joys and sorrows that we were going to experience in life, all at once, it would be too much for us to take in. I am glad I had no idea that COVID-19 was on the horizon. Given the realities it brought, I wish it had not appeared at all. But I am grateful that I was able to live my life up until that time in March of this year, unaware. I won't say "blissfully unaware," because other challenges were part of life, as they are in every life. But the very strange, unusual times in which we have been living were not even a passing thought. I am glad that God does not show us the whole picture from the get-go.

It may be that, since God created us as rational beings, God likes to give us a chance to problem solve; to put our energies toward how we can make the world better than when we came on the scene; to support others in ways that they need, and that we have the ability to make a difference; to tell someone new that God loves them, and in so doing, bring them a measure of the hope that is within us.

Two: God does disclose things to us, but, sometimes, it is only after "long ages."

I must say that if we pay attention to the sweep of salvation history, I am impressed by the people who continued to watch; who continued to wait; who continued to trust in God; and who, through countless generations, still lived in the time before the mystery was disclosed. At some level, I wonder how they managed. And at some level I say, "Great was their faith!"

I suppose that every one of us has in our backstory an ancestor who hoped and waited and worked for something that they did not live long enough to see — who did their best; who used the resources that came their way; who worked very hard, often at jobs that you and I would balk at doing; who managed to put their disappointments to one side, and to still find the wherewithal to enjoy the people around them, their families, and what mattered most in life. All the while, they knew that they were working not only for their own well-being but for a larger goal, a longer-term goal — one that they might or might not live long enough to see.

Just think of our Old Testament ancestors in the faith, who did just that. They were forebears of faith and fortitude, even though they did not have the answer to the mystery. They trusted that the Messiah would come in God's good time. They may have become discouraged from time to time, but they also kept on hoping and believing that God would fulfill God's promises and, as a result, all the world would be blessed.

Do you have that kind of perseverance? I believe you do. You certainly have demonstrated it this year, as you have been dealing with a worldwide pandemic that has landed on your doorstep and changed what you think of as ordinary day-to-day living. You have done your very best through some of the very worst of times. You have done so, not knowing when it all will be resolved, when we can be back in a manner of living that does not include social distancing or the wearing of masks or working and learning from home.

You are like the people who lived in Israel and Judea in those days before the mystery was disclosed in that regard, but not in regard to what Paul is saying — because you know the who, and what, and when, and why, and way, that God disclosed the mystery. You are among the most blessed of people, who know that Jesus is the Messiah; that this little Baby, whose birth we are soon to remember and celebrate, is the One that the Old Testament people believed would arrive, but they did not know just when; that the Man who crafted things out of wood and then used those same skills to hone human hearts was just beyond the horizon.

You have seen it happen. You can tell the story of His arrival by heart. You can sing the carols about His coming without looking at a book. You can live as He lived, and love as He loved, not because you imagine that the mystery would one day be disclosed, but rather because God has revealed it to you. How blessed you are! And what a blessing you are!

Three: The disclosure of the mystery is *not* the end of the story.

Is it?

This is different from a mystery by Arthur Conan Doyle, or Agatha Christie, or Dorothy L. Sayers. Once their mysteries are disclosed, we get to those two little words: “The End.” We close the book. The story is over.

Paul, in writing to the Romans, understood that, although the mystery is disclosed, the story of Christian faith is not over. Far from it. No wonder his benediction to the Romans, here at this point in his letter, has an open-ended nature to it. Paul points out that the Romans are being strengthened. “God is strengthening you” is how he says it. They are being given ability and agility, range of motion and stamina — “strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,” as the hymn says. And we know it is good — because this strength is from God.

I mentioned our ancestors earlier. They knew that their contribution was not the end of the story. They might be surprised about you, and where you are, and what you have been able to accomplish, that they could only dream about. And that is good, because they stand as symbols of what you and I are called to do — knowing the disclosed mystery of Jesus Christ. Wouldn’t they be proud of you? Yes, they would. They would say, “I am glad I worked so hard in my day, to see what they can do in theirs.”

And the Christians who came before us are like unto the people in our family trees — who, if we were able to see the vision of their witness, would gather, like we ourselves, around that tree which in this season reminds us we are all sisters and brothers in Christ. I would like to picture them with us in spirit, as we decorate and place gifts under our Christmas trees, as we enjoy the light that shines forth from them. And I would like to think that — even when the trees are gone, the lights unstrung, the ornaments carefully packed away — the light of Christ will continue to glow, from you and yours. That is what God is strengthening you for.

This benediction — this blessing Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome — places the coming of Jesus, the incarnation, which we are about to celebrate, into the broad context of God’s ceaseless desire for humanity to live in wholeness.

So let the lights and ornaments of Christmas find a treasured place in your heart. What are those ornaments?

- God is the One from whom all blessings flow.
- God is the One to whom all praise belongs.
- God is the One who loves you without limit.
- God is the One who enters this world quietly.
- God is the One who is always changing things for the better.

God is the One who invites you to do likewise. This Advent season, in every time and season, in Christ, may it be so. Amen.