Sunday, December 11, 1977
THE MYSTERIOUS IN CHRISTMAS
Isaiah 55:9; Luke 1:26-37

Among other things, the stories of Advent and Christmas in the Bible, speak to us of the mysterious in life; of the mystery of God and creation and the fact that God often works in mysterious ways. These stories are filled with unusual events. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth are told they will have a baby, even though Elizabeth is beyond child-bearing age and has not been able to have babies earlier. The child will be the forerunner of the Messiah. He will be called John the Baptist. Then a young woman named Mary is told in a vision that she will have a child and he will be the Son of God. She is unmarried at the time. So it is that the Advent and Christmas stories are filled with angels, visions, shepherds seeing strange sights, wise men coming from the east and more.

The virgin birth and the events which surround it, speak of mystery, not of the fact of the birth itself or the how.

And before these stories, we have the overall story of a strange people called the Hebrews, who have a covenant with God. From. this people come prophets who speak of a new age, a time when the Almighty Creator God will be present among all people in a new way. The Bible is not a book of dogmatics in these and other stories, but it points to mystery. “Now we see in a mirror dimly.”

We can see why Luke tells us that Mary, the mother of Jesus, wonders how all these things can be and what the meaning is. And later Luke tells us that “Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart.”

The point is the details of the stories are not the important factors, but the stories themselves are part of the early church’s attempt to remember that there is deep mystery in all these events. The stories underscore and point to that mystery. They remind us again and again that God cannot be simply explained or contained in any one formula or statement or dogma or creed. They tell us, as did the prophets, that God’s ways are not our ways, nor his thoughts our thoughts.” Mystery, deep mystery!

This should not surprise us. If we’re thoughtful persons, then we know that the older we grow, the more mysterious life becomes to us. We sometimes say to a young person that when he or she grows up, one will know more, but that is really not true. A person may know more as far as the facts are concerned and will have more experience, but it’s also true that an increasing experience of life only deepens the sense of mystery. We simply know more of what we don’t know.

The same is true of our relationship to God. The more we come into a relationship, the more mystery there is about God.

It’s true in all of life. Not too many years ago such words as space and time seemed relatively simple. Mystery was downplayed. But now we are told that space is curved, and we ask of time if we are in time or if time is in us. Causality was taken to be a straightforward affair, a chain with alternate links called cause and effect. But now we are told that no new event can be fully explained by its antecedents, not even in nature, let alone human nature; for in every new event there are times of unpredictable newness.

We say of modern knowledge, 17 that mystery is solved!" and then find that the "solution" has roused six other mysteries. When a librarian at a university wondered out loud how he could find shelf space for the flood of new books, a scientist advised, "Take any book of science more than ten years old and put in in the cellar."

Recently, I read an article by a physician who was reminding his colleagues to regain a sense of mystery. He said -- "life and learning have drained from us that sense of wonder and awe that used to sparkle in us as children."

Most physicians remember these early feelings of wonder that came with learning about the expanding universe or viewing for the first time, cell life through a microscope. Mystery at both ends of the universe — the exquisitely small and the infinite — delighted and intrigued us. But between these two lies the so-called real world. The world of bank balances, and cancer, mortgages, cocktail parties, inflation, and the battered child. Surrounded on all sides by crises and pressure, we concentrate on the day-to-day crises, and often neglect the wonders and mysteries and inevitably grow dull.

Albert Einstein once said, "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed. To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the higher wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms — this knowledge, this feeling is at the center of true religiousness."

1. Thus, the first thing to remember at this time of year is that the mysterious in advent and Christmas remind us of the mysterious in all of life. If we do nothing else during this season, we need. to stop, pause, wonder, stand in awe, reflect. Too much of the time our lives run ahead with every moment filled with something that must be done or seen or planned.

Mystery is not dead! Do not let it be dead for you. If during this season we can pass along that one idea — that wonder still exists, then already we will be getting at the deep meaning of Christmas.

2. Secondly, the mystery, which surrounds Christmas and all of life, tells us again and again to have a deep distrust of dogmatism, of people or books or formulas which offer only simple answers. The mysterious in Christmas reminds us that simple easy answers are almost always misleading and false.

The mysterious in Christmas says that whenever you see anyone standing over against the mystery of life, whipping off finalities as though he or she would settle it, distrust that person. In the field of religion, there are always people who claim to know completely God's will. They have all the answers. And there are people like this outside religion.

There are also people who claim to be God's intimates, perhaps even God's favorites, but they thus show more of bigotry and pride than of Godliness. Or is their claim a matter of insecurity. But how much do we know about God? Enough perhaps, but not more than enough.

In these days too many people are looking for easy simplisms in religion and in other areas of life as well. Give me a simple answer, they say, one which removes all mystery. Find me a guru to follow. Then I won't have to think or make any decisions for myself. Explain God's

redemption in Jesus Christ in one simple phrase or formula. And God is reduced to dogma and nothing more.

For the nation as well as the individual, the unexamined life is not much of life. Again, the mysterious in Christmas tells us to regard with suspicion any person who argues that there is a single, quick, easy, sure cure for all our ills — for perplexity, conflict, and prejudice, for blindness, ignorance, and stupidity.

There are no quick cures, but there are always long hard cures that can be applied to society, government, war, inflation, and the human soul. A baby in a manger some two-thousand years ago, who becomes an adult, gains a few followers and is crucified is not a quick simple, easy answer. It's a mysterious answer. The one who seeks to save his or her 1ife will lose it, but the one who loses his or her life for my sake will find it. That's mystery. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the peacemakers. That's mystery. God's ways are not our ways.

Life is filled with mystery. If suffering makes us gentle and turns us to heaven's help, is it misfortune? If pros-perity quickens in us an arrogant pride and a false self-dependence, is it good fortune? If truth makes a person whole even when truth is defeated, is it defeated? The mysterious in Christmas reminds us that God's ways are not our ways.

God is working, but in God's own way and in God's own time. How much do we in all our knowledge know about life, really? Why is human nature crossed by perversity though it craves love? Why does righteous judgment often miscarry not only when evil people succeed, but also because good peoples' plans are thwarted? WE say God's providence is evident in the beauty and order of nature; but when we see a flood or tornado, we are no longer sure of providence or order or beauty. Mystery.

Einstein once said, "Before God we are equally foolish and equally wise." But the wise know it, while the foolish think they can be as wise as God; and the wise, knowing that our knowledge is as nothing before God, are thus doubly wise; and like Einstein they keep on learning.

Mysterious. We complain against God But why? How much do we know or understand? We demand that God meet our time schedule, which is almost always present time. We require that God suit our space measurements. God's will be done, as we wish it, on our own plot of land. We will not believe in God until God plays lackey to our tiny questions to answer them in our answers.

Nietzsche wrote: "If we ever encountered a god who always cured us of a cold in the head at just the right time or got us into our carriage at the very instant heavy rain began to fall, he would seem so absurd a god that he'd have to be abolished even if he existed."

So, God comes to us in mysterious ways. And in childish conceit, we dismiss God, announcing ourselves atheists. What do we really know? The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; not cringing fear, but awestruck fear, which says wonderingly, "God's ways are not our ways."

Deep mystery, the mysterious in Christmas, does not mean that we human beings no longer look for answers. Faith does not mean faith going counter to knowledge. It means faith in the light of knowledge and faith as the beginning of new knowledge.

3. Thirdly, the mysterious in Christmas speaks to us of the mysteriousness of God's redemption. Again, God's ways are not our ways. God's redemption is quiet and lowly. It comes in great humility. God comes into our history in a manger birth, comes incognito, long ago and far away, in a lowly home and conquered land.

The baby becomes a man and speaks words which others had spoken, but with a new emphasis, a different obedience, a new power. Then he is crucified. And the conviction given to those who loved him that he was not dead but was with them in death and would be with them beyond death. Then a strange fellov1ship called the church. What a mysterious way to redeem the world! God's ways are not our ways. Who could've guessed that in all the abyss of space and time, this would be God's way?

But is it not always love's way to be lowly? Can love ever coerce? Must we not always be free to believe or disbelieve? To accept or refuse? Thus, God comes as the servant in the house. God uses the backstairs at Bethlehem, not the front stairs of pomp and power.

Who could've ever imagined such redemption? But then God's ways are not our ways. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him. We can believe. We can believe and bow before the mysterious, so awestruck in power, so lowly in love.

So, this morning and during this Advent and Christmas season, ponder with Mary the mysterious in Christmas, the mysterious in God and in life itself. Delight in mystery. Eternal joy is not to be reached by living on the surface. It is rather attained by breaking through the surface, by penetrating the deep things of ourselves, of our world and of God. Amen.