Sunday, December 11, 1983
METAPHORS AND MYSTERY
Isaiah 55:6-9; Luke 1:5-13

What do metaphors have to do with mystery? And what do both of them have to do with Advent, Christmas, and with God?

1. First, let's look again at what a metaphor is, and then we'll see how it relates to mystery and to this season of Advent and Christmas and what it all has to say about God.

A metaphor is a figure of speech, or a comparison, or an image or symbol, an analogy. Religious language, and particularly the language of the Bible, is filled with metaphors. "The Lord is my shepherd," is a metaphor. God is like a father or mother — that's using a metaphor to speak of God.

Jesus used all kinds of metaphors to describe himself. Here are a few of them: "I am the bread of life." "I am the good shepherd." "I am the vine, and you are the branches." The gospel writers call Jesus "the lamb of God," "the son of God," "the light of the world," "the word made flesh," and more.

Jesus said to his disciples, "You are the salt of the earth," a metaphor. "You are the light of the world," another metaphor. The idea of God as a "trinity" is a metaphor, a way of saying that we experience God in at least three ways.

One problem with metaphors in religious language is that over the years people tend to make the metaphor into doctrine. So, God as father becomes: God is a male. Metaphors, however, are always meant to point beyond themselves.

The parables which Jesus told are metaphors. What is the kingdom of God? In answer to this question, Jesus does not speak of the reorganization of society. Rather, he says, "the kingdom of God is like a woman in search of a priceless pearl, and she finds it." Or, to use the language of today, it is like finding a diamond ring you thought you'd lost forever.

Metaphors suggest or point to, rather than explain in detail. How difficult is it for a rich person to enter paradise? Jesus used a metaphor: it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. A modern metaphor might be, "It is easier for a Mercedes to get through a revolving door," or "It is easier for Nelson Rockefeller to get through the night deposit slot of First National City Bank" than it is for a rich person to enter God's kingdom.

But then Jesus adds that, though this might be impossible for us, with God all things are possible. Or he might quote Isaiah, "For my thoughts are higher than your thoughts and my ways higher than your ways, says the Lord."

2. What, then, do metaphors have to do with mystery? Since God can never be adequately described with human words, instead we use word pictures, or metaphors. The fact that we have to use metaphors tells us that there is always mystery beyond our descriptions.

A metaphor calls us to look at something in a new way. Metaphors use images. The opposite of a metaphor is often abstract language or analytic language. For example, using abstract

language we can say that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. But that's not very descriptive.

Thus, Jesus always described God and God's activities and attributes with parables or stories or metaphors. Does God answer your prayers? Jesus says if your 10-year-old asks you for a goldfish, do you give him a black widow spider? If he comes to you for an Eskimo Pie, do you knock out his two front teeth? Does God know you intimately? "The very hairs of your head are numbered!"

Metaphors point to mystery. They at the same time point to new ways of seeing and understanding what God is like.

God is the shepherd who gets more of a kick out of that one lost sheep when he finds it again than out of the 99 who had the good sense not to get lost in the first place. God is the eccentric host who, when the country club crowd all turn out to have other things more important to do than come live it up with him, goes out into the skid rows and soup kitchens and charity wards and brings them all to dinner.

God is the outlandish God who does impossible things with impossible people. And metaphors help point to the mystery. God's ways are certainly not our ways, nor God's thoughts our thoughts.

3. What, then, do metaphors and mystery have to do with Advent and Christmas?

Like metaphors, the stories that surround Advent and Christmas speak to us of the mysterious in life and of the fact that God works in ways that are not our ways.

These stories are filled with unusual events. Zechariah and his 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. More mystery — this individual will be the preparer of the way for the Messiah.

Then a young unmarried woman named Mary is told in a vision that she will have a child and he will be the "son of God." And she wonders how this can possible be, since she has no husband. When the baby is born, it is in a stable, hidden from most of the world, yet a star tells others of its birth. The event is also tragic, for the King has many babies killed in the region of Bethlehem, hoping in that way to kill this special new child.

The birth of Jesus and the events which surround it as told by Matthew and Luke speak of mystery and of God's ways not being our ways.

These stories remind us again and again that God cannot be simply explained or contained in any one formula or statement or dogma or creed. This should not surprise us. The older we grow, the more mysterious life becomes.

The metaphors and mysteries of Advent and Christmas remind us that there is mystery in all of life. If we do nothing else during this season, we need to stop, pause, wonder, stand in awe, and reflect.

Stop and think for a moment right now. What do you wonder about the most? In his latest book, Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony, Dr. Lewis Thomas has one essay entitled, "Seven Wonders." He begins the essay by noting that he had recently

received an invitation to join six other people at dinner to make a list of the “Seven Wonders of the Modern World,” to replace the seven old, out-of-date wonders. He didn’t participate in the panel, but in the essay, he tells us what his present-day list of seven wonders would include.

One of the seven is a species of beetle known as “oncideres.” It qualifies as a wonder because of the exceedingly modern questions raised for evolutionary biologists about the three consecutive things on the mind of the female of the species. Her first though is for a mimosa tree, which she finds and climbs, ignoring all other kinds of trees in the vicinity. Her second thought is for the laying of eggs, which she does by crawling out on a limb, cutting a longitudinal slit with her mandible, and depositing eggs beneath the slit. Her third and last thought concerns the welfare of her offspring; beetle larvae cannot survive in live wood, so she backs up a foot or so and cuts a neat circular girdle all around the limb, through bark and down into the cambium. It takes her eight hours to finish this cabinet work. Then she leaves, and where she goes, I do not know. The limb dies from the girdling, falls to the ground in the next breeze, and the larvae feed and grow into the next generation.

How on earth did these three linked thoughts in her mind evolve together in evolution? How could any one of the three become fixed as beetle behavior by itself, without the other two? How does she know what to do? And how did the mimosa tree enter into the picture? Left to themselves, unpruned, mimosa trees have a life expectancy of 25 to 30 years. Pruned each year, which is what the beetle’s girdling work accomplishes, the tree can flourish for a century. The mimosa — beetle relationship is an elegant example of symbiotic partnership. An example of the connectedness of all creation. It is truly something to make us wonder.

Something else Lewis Thomas wonders about. It is human brings when we are gathered together in our collective, critical masses. So far, we have learned how to be useful to each other only when we collect in small groups - families, circles of friends, sometimes even in committees. The drive to be useful is encoded in our genes. But when we gather in very large numbers, as in the modern nation-states, we seem capable of levels of folly and self-destruction to be found nowhere else in all of nature.

Certainly, there is a lot to wonder about. A baby in a stable! A man on a cross! What do these say to us about God?

There is deep mystery in all of life. If you find someone who says there is no mystery or wonder, who says that he or she has all the answers, then be careful of that person or that group.

Or if someone says, “All the answers are in the Bible,” be careful of that person. The Bible is <u>not</u> an answer book for all questions. It, too, is filled with metaphors and mysteries.

The mystery which surrounds Christmas and all that comes before and after it reminds us to have a deep distrust of dogmatism, of people or books or formulas or groups which offer only simple answers to immense mysteries.

Life is filled with mysteries and ambiguities. The one who seeks to save his or her life will lose it, but the one who loses or gives his or her life away will find it. Mystery! Blessed are the meek! Blessed are the poor in spirit! Blessed are the peacemakers! God’s ways are not our ways.

This Advent season as you prepare again for Christmas, take some time to wonder about the wonder of it all. Ponder with Elizabeth and Mary the mysteriousness of God and of life itself. Delight in mystery. One reason that religion is often flat and stale and wearisome for people is that the sheer wonder is left out.

Advent and Christmas knock a routine, commonsense world of order topsy turvy. Everything is gloriously out of place; Elizabeth has a baby when she is too old. Mary, an unmarried young woman, has a baby in a barn. There is a song in the sky. And shepherd see visions. Amazing, mysterious! Irregular. Amen.