Sunday, December 24, 1989
THE MYSTERY OF CHRISTMAS
Matthew 1:18-25

There is a mystery to Christmas that attracts people of all ages. The stories surrounding Christmas in the Bible are filled with dreams, angels, visions, a young woman pregnant before she is married, her fiancé Joseph who marries her anyway after God tells him in a dream to do so, shepherds seeing strange sights, wise men coming from the East, and more.

And before we ever hear about the baby born in Bethlehem, we have the Old Testament stories coming out of a people of God called the Hebrews or Jews. This community claims that the one God who created all things has a covenant with them. From this people come prophets who speak of a new age, a time when the Eternal Creator God will be present among all people in a new way. The Bible is not a book of dogmatics or doctrines; rather, in these and other stories, there is mystery. “Now we see in a mirror dimly.”

We can see why the Gospel of Luke tells us that Mary, the mother of Jesus, wonders how all these things can be and what the deeper meaning is. And later, Luke tells us that “Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart.” I’m sure that Joseph did a lot of pondering also.

All of the stories that surround the Christmas event are part of the early church’s attempt to remember that there is deep mystery in the way God works among us. Christmas reminds us again and again that God cannot be simply explained or contained in any neat formula, dogma, or creed. “God’s ways are not our ways, nor God’s thoughts our thoughts.” Mystery, deep mystery. Children instinctively sense the mystery of Christmas.

We adults know of the mystery too. We know that the older we grow, the more mysterious life is. We sometimes say to young people that when they grow up, they will know more, but that is only partially true. A person may know more as far as the facts are concerned and may have gained the wisdom of experience, but it’s also true that an increasing experience of life only deepens the sense of mystery. We know that the more we know, the more there is that we don’t know.

The same is true of our relationship with God. The more we deepen that 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. 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.

Sometimes a new discovery will cause us to say: “That mystery is solved.” And then we find that the new discovery has roused six other mysteries.

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 doctors remember those 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 then we also have to deal with everyday matters — the world of bank balances, cancer, mortgages, cocktail parties, inflation, taxes, and abused children. Surrounded on all sides by crises and pressure, we concentrate on the day-to-day crises and often neglect the wonders and mysteries of life, and in so doing, we can grow dull and cynical.

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.” On the other hand, to be able to sense the mystery in life, that’s the center of true religious faith. Here are three things I want you to let the mystery of Christmas do for you:

First, let the mystery of Christmas remind you of the mysterious in all of life. If you do nothing else this Christmas season, take time to stop, pause, wonder, stand in awe, reflect, and be aware of the holy.
Mystery is at the heart of life. Do not let it be dead for you. If during this Christmas season you can pass along that one idea — that wonder and awe still exist — then you will be getting at the heart of Christmas.

Frederick Buechner wrote about Christmas: “The lovely old carols played and replayed till their effect is like a jackhammer... the commercialism of almost everything else, people spending money they can’t afford on presents you neither need nor want, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, the plastic tree, the cornball crèche, the Hallmark Virgin. Yet for all our efforts, we’ve never quite managed to ruin it. That itself is part of the miracle and the mystery.”

The Word became flesh. Ultimate mystery. God in a helpless baby, born in a manger.

Secondly, the mystery that surrounds Christmas and all of life tells us again and again to have a deep distrust of dogmatism, of people or books or formulas that offer only simple answers. The mystery in Christmas reminds us that simple, easy answers are almost always misleading and false. The mystery in Christmas says that whenever you see anyone standing over against the mystery of life whipping off finalities as though he or she could dispel all mystery — distrust those answers. In the field of religion, especially, there are always individuals and groups who claim to know completely and finally God’s will for every situation. They have all the answers.

There are also people who claim to be God’s intimates, God’s favorites, and they frequently show more bigotry and self-righteousness than Godliness. Or is their claim to know God’s will in every situation only a mirror of their own security?

In every age, there are people looking for simple answers in religion, as well as in other areas of life. “Give me a simple answer, one that leaves no room for mystery,” they say. “Find me a guru to follow. Then I won’t have to think or make any decisions for myself. Explain God’s redeeming of the creation through Jesus in one simple formula.” And God is reduced to a formula and nothing more.

For the nation, as well as the individual, the unexamined life is not much of a life. Again, the mystery of 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, prejudice, blindness, ignorance, and stupidity.

There are no quick, painless cures, but there are long, hard, slow-to-recognize cures that can be applied to society, to human relationships, to war, to homelessness, to hunger, to more democratic forms of government, and to peace for the world. God is at work all the time, and frequently in quiet, unobtrusive ways. God coming in Jesus at Christmas was not a quick fix.

A baby in a manger some two thousand years ago, who became an adult, gained a few followers, was crucified, and then lives on in us, is not a quick, simple, easy-to-understand answer. It is rather a mysterious answer. “Those who seek to save their lives will lose them, and those who give away their lives for my sake will save them.” 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 creative — it’s not the total misfortune we thought it was. If prosperity causes within 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 mystery of 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, really know about life? 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 people’s good plans are thwarted? We say God’s providence is evident in the beauty and order of nature, but when we see a flood, tornado, or earthquake, is God’s providence also in what we perceive to be the disorder of nature? Mystery.

Einstein 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 their knowledge is as nothing before God, are thus doubly wise, and they keep on learning.

Mystery. 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 long as it meets with our will.

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, that god would seem so absurd a god that he’d have to be abolished even if he existed.”

Christmas reminds us that God comes to us in mysterious ways — in a manger and on a cross. Sometimes, in our 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 awe-struck fear, which says with wonder, “God’s ways are not our ways.”

The mystery of Christmas does not mean that we do not 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.

Thirdly, the mystery of Christmas speaks to us of the mystery of God's redeeming love. Again, God's ways are not our ways. God's redemption is quiet and lowly. It comes in humility. God enters our history in a manger birth, comes incognito.
The baby grows up and speaks words that others had spoken, but with a new emphasis, a new authority. Then he is crucified. And the conviction given to those who followed him, were loved by him, and loved him in return, is that he has overcome even death. Then a strange community called the church. What a mysterious way to change 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 humble and lowly? Can love ever coerce? Must we not always be free to believe or not believe? To accept God's love or refuse? Thus God comes as the servant in the house. God uses the back stairs at Bethlehem, not the front stairs of pomp and power.

Who could've imagined such redemption? Mystery. But then God's ways are not our ways.

This Christmas, then, ponder again the mystery. God so loved the world — the whole world — and that includes you and me. Amen.