Sunday, December 12, 1999
THE MYSTERY OF CHRISTMAS (No. 1 in a Series)
John 1:6-8,19-28

The word “mystery” does not appear in the stories of the birth of Jesus according to Matthew and Luke, yet the event is filled with mystery, and that’s part of its charm. Part of what makes Christmas so mysterious is that both Matthew’s and Luke’s accounts are very brief. There are few details given. The writer of the earliest books included in what we call the New Testament, the letters of the Apostle Paul, have nothing at all to say about the birth of Jesus or his parents.

The Gospel of Mark, which is considered to be the oldest of the four gospels, begins with Jesus as an adult and has nothing at all to say about his birth or growing up. John the Baptist, whose role it is to be the “preparer of the way” for Jesus, seems to know nothing about the details of his birth and is not even sure when he will appear on the scene. He is surprised one day when Jesus appears and asks to be baptized by him. Only then is John aware of who Jesus is.

To demonstrate how deep the mystery is, let’s consider some of the things we don’t know and some that we do know about the birth of Jesus and the rest of his life. We do not know exactly when Jesus was born. We don’t know exactly in what year he was born. There were no birth certificates or any other official records corresponding to those we use today to find the date of a person’s birth. Most scholars give the year 4 B.C. as the date of his birth because it was in that year that Herod the Great, King of Judea, died. According to the birth stories in Matthew and Luke, he was the king when Jesus was born. Therefore, it is assumed that Jesus was born sometime before Herod died. Some scholars put it back as far as 8 B.C., and others go all the way from 8 to 4 B.C.

We do not know the exact day or month in which he was born. We are almost certain it was not the 24th of December, though it could’ve been. Scholars and historians are inclined to think he was born in April. The fact is the early church was not concerned at all, so people were not curious about his birth date.

How then did we arrive at December 24th for Christmas Eve? When the church had become more established in the Roman Empire, there was a popular pagan festival the Romans celebrated on the 25th of December. It was the celebration of the birthday of the Sun god, and you can see why: it was then thought that the 25th was the winter solstice. We are now told by the experts that it is the 22nd of December, but then it was the 25th, the time when the sun had reached its lowest point and had begun to come back up to lengthen the days. By the year 336, that festival had been transformed into the celebration of the birth not of the Sun God, but of the Son of God. The day is not essential, is it? After all, the Queen of England was born in April, but her birthday is celebrated in June, either because it is a more convenient day for most people to celebrate or because the weather is less likely to be inclement.

We know almost nothing about the physical appearance of Jesus as a baby, a young man, and an adult. Was he tall or short? Did he have a beard or was he clean-shaven? Was his complexion light or dark? We have no idea. It’s amazing that in the gospel accounts there are no physical descriptions. As far as we know, no one ever drew a picture of him, so we have no idea of his physical appearance. I like the mystery of it. Even though he could read and write, his teachings were all oral. He never wrote any of them down to give to his disciples.

Following his death on the cross, we still do not know for sure what tomb he was buried in. If you visit Jerusalem today, you will be shown two possible sites, and you'll have to take your choice. There are good arguments in favor of each one.

What then do we know about his birth and growing up? We know that around two thousand years ago, a baby was born into a family of carpenters in occupied Palestine. He was a small-town Jew born in a bad time for Jews. Their land was no longer their own, and they had been made to bow before a succession of conquerors who had diluted their proud culture and, as many would have said, infected it. His name was Jesus of Nazareth. His parents were Mary and Joseph. As an adult, he preached a message of mercy, love, and peace, and was crucified for his trouble. Although he became known as the long-promised Messiah, he didn't fit any of the preconceived notions of what the Messiah would be or do. Even John the Baptist, when in prison, had doubts about whether or not Jesus was the "promised one." He sent some of his followers to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

We know that Jesus was a Jew. He learned the Jewish scriptures, what we today call the Old Testament. We know he attracted crowds to himself by his authoritative applications of the scriptures, his unusual power to heal those who were suffering, and his willingness to be a friend to anyone, especially those who were rejected by the larger society.

In his teaching, Jesus kept two audiences in mind: the poor and the miserable, and those who, because they are neither poor nor miserable, have a religious obligation to stand in solidarity with those at the bottom of the heap.

In his teaching, Jesus does so much to invite some of the invitations that may appear uninviting. He insists that, if only we would look at the world through his eyes, we would see that even the harshest life can be full of comfort and the mercy of God.

The truth is that no one is permanently on top of the social heap. All of us, from time to time, find ourselves in misery, pain, and at least spiritual poverty. Jesus, however, insists the ultimate answer is a simple one: "Come to me, all you who labor and are weighed down with burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

In addition, his teachings were filled with metaphors and stories that added to their mystery. To what can we compare the Kingdom of God or the way God works in the world? In answer to such questions, 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.

How difficult it is for a rich person to enter God's Kingdom? "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter." Or it could be, "It is easier for a Mercedes to get through a revolving door than it is for a rich person to know God's love." But then to add more mystery, Jesus adds that though this might be impossible for us, with God all things are possible.

It's mysterious. God is the shepherd who gets more joy out of that one lost sheep when it is found 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 high society crowd all turn out to have other things more

important to do than come to his party, goes out into the skid rows, soup kitchens, and charity wards and invites them all to dinner.

The birth of Jesus and the events that surround it 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, statement, dogma, or creed. With God, there is always mystery.

The story of Christmas, in its simplicity and mystery, can give us a new perspective on life. God's ways are not our ways. God forever surprises us. God is not impressed by the mighty and powerful in this world. God does not come to us in the garb of a conqueror. In an incredible act of humility, God enters our world in the same way that each one of us enters this world — in the form of a helpless baby.

The mystery of Christmas is that it turns everything upside down. Halford Luccock tells a story of accidentally bumping into a woman who was Christmas shopping and loaded with packages. The bump caused all the packages to scatter around her. As he was trying to help her pick up the packages, she said, "Oh, I hate Christmas anyway. It turns everything upside down." Luccock said to her, "That is just what Christmas was made for."

The mystery of Christmas is that it's the story of a baby, and a baby's chief business is to turn things upside down. As those of us who have had children know, a baby rearranges everything he or she sees — from the order of who's important in the family to the dishes on the table. A baby in a family divides time into two eras, just as Christmas does. There is B.C., which means "before child," and A.O., which means "after deluge."

Yes, there is a deep mystery in Christmas, even though there are some things we do know. Yet some of what we know only adds more mystery. We know that the birth of Jesus brought something new into the world. He brought love; not love without tears, not love without suffering, but love without limits. Not romantic love, not the attraction of two young people — this is wonderful, but that isn't what he brought — you can't be romantic about that. His love is realistic love, the love that cares, gives, and understands; the love that heals, saves, puts together the broken pieces of life, and mends broken relationships.

You might ask, was this love never in the world before Jesus? It was. It was present at the creation when God made everything that is. It was present when God made human beings. It is present in you from the moment you were born. It has always been here but sometimes buried so deep that you have trouble finding it; sometimes dimmed by disappointment or hate, sometimes mixed with so many other things that it is diluted. But it can never be snuffed out. It is a light shining in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The mystery of Christmas is that this love was focused in a human being, undiluted, unscreened, unlimited, and unmistakable. Furthermore, the love that was revealed in Jesus is communicable, contagious, and conveyable, even in small doses, to people like you and me. The love of God became a human being and lives among us. The Stephen Ministers that we commissioned earlier are a good example of this. As they go about their ministry, the love of God becomes flesh in them. It is made manifest. It is a light shining in the darkness. And you know what the bigger miracle is? It is not only in them but also in the people to whom they minister. The mystery of Christmas is that Jesus is still present among us today. Sometimes people ask me, "When will Jesus return?" My quick answer is, "I didn't know he ever left."

If he is still here, where is he? Here's the real mystery. Let me quote Thomas Cahill from his newest book, Desire of the Everlasting Hills: "It is ironic that some Christians make such a fuss about the elements of the Eucharist — bowing before them, kneeling in adoration because Christ is present in them — but have never bothered to heed these solemn words about the presence of Christ in every individual who is in need. Jesus told us only once (at the Last Supper) that he would be present in the bread and wine, but he tells us repeatedly in the gospels that he is always present in the poor and afflicted — to whom we should all bow and kneel. It is perverse that some Christians make such a fuss about the bound text of God's Word, carrying it processionally, holding it with reverence, never allowing it to touch the ground, but have never considered seriously the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, in the light of which we should always catch God's needy before they hit the ground."

So during this season, as you continue to prepare for Christmas, take some time to ponder the mystery of it all. Amen.