

Decoding the Message

The movie, “A Christmas Story,” plays on a loop every year on Christmas Day. If you happen to be channel surfing, you can find it and watch different parts throughout the day or evening. An amusing part of the movie is when Ralphie, the young main character, awaits the arrival of his secret decoder ring in the mail that will help him “unlock the mysteries of the universe.” Eventually, this decoder ring arrives, and Ralphie is bursting with anticipation. Much to his disappointment, the ring decodes the message, “Drink more Ovaltine.”

How many of us wish we had a secret decoder ring to unlock any secrets at all? If we look at the reading from Genesis as well as John’s Gospel, it would appear that Abram and Nicodemus could have used a decoder ring to figure out what was being said to them. Abram is told that God would make of him a whole new nation. Abram knew that he and Sarai were getting older, and it would be virtually impossible for them to have a child. What could God mean? Nicodemus also needed assistance with decoding, as he had difficulty grasping the concept of being born again or reborn.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and part of the Sanhedrin. He was different in that he actually knew that Jesus was at least of God. The rest of the Pharisees only sought to trick Jesus and get him to leave, as he was “messaging” with their quality of life as the keepers of the rules and all things sacred and holy. When I read this, I feel a little sorry for Nicodemus. Here he is, being quizzed by Jesus and coming up empty in the discussion. Nicodemus couldn’t even keep up and stopped to ask questions. We would probably be a lot like Nicodemus if we encountered Christ. We’d look for our decoder ring to help us understand the message.

Paul, in his letter to the Church in Rome, showed that he had a better grasp on Abram or Abraham’s directive from God. He knew that Abraham had to act in faith, simply believing that God would show him the way. Basically, it is what Abram, accompanied by Lot, did when God had them leave where they were. “God gives life to the dead,” wrote Paul. Probably a message the Church in Rome needed to hear as they were being persecuted for their faith. And, Jesus tries to explain to Nicodemus who he was when he gives the now-famous verse, “For God

so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

How do we sum up our faith? In my humble opinion, the one with the “secret decoder ring” could be the psalmist. “I lift up my eyes to the heavens, from where will come my help? My help is in the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” The One who keeps us from all evil. The One who will keep our lives.

The decoding is simpler for us who have been raised in the church, but we still struggle with it. The mysteries of the universe start to be unfolded for us, not with a secret decoder ring, but with our faith in God. While we may struggle with our faith, we have the example of Abraham and Sarah. When we can’t quite grasp what is being said to us in the Scripture, we acknowledge that we are like Nicodemus. We don’t lack faith, we just don’t have it down yet. You’ve heard me say before that we “practice” our faith; we need to continue to do just that.

What are the secrets of the universe? They may be far out of our grasp. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.” During

this Lenten season, let us look to the Savior for our own salvation.

Psalm 62 tells us, “Only in God will my soul be at rest, from God comes my hope, my salvation. God alone is my rock of safety, my strength, my glory, my God.” My prayer is that we continue to keep the faith of Abraham, the Psalmist, Paul, the early church in Rome, and Nicodemus. When we struggle, may we lift our eyes, our hearts, our voices, and our souls.