

Sermon ✝ December 19, 2021

Luke 1:39-55

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Have you contemplated any mystery lately? Probably not. Our age isn't much into mystery.

So we don't understand this Mary-and-the-angel thing very well. We've heard the story so often, over so many Christmases, that it's only another story.

An angel (*who really believes in angels today?*) comes to Mary, a simple girl of honorable lineage, who is engaged to a man named Joseph, and tells Mary that she is to become the mother of the long-awaited Messiah of Israel, not by natural conception but by the Spirit of God; and Mary keeps all this to herself and ponders it in her heart, at least until she gets to visit her cousin Elizabeth.

Eventually, of course, Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem, where they spend the night in a stable and the long-awaited Messiah is born, which fact is then announced by angels to shepherds on a hillside and somehow surmised by a little band of so-called Wise Men from the East, who follow a star, lose it, then find it again shining brightly over Bethlehem, where they worship the infant Messiah with gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Isn't that the way we usually listen to the story, our modern cynicism commenting on the ancient text? We naturally deflate it. We reduce it to something we can handle, something we can halfway understand with our skeptical, secular minds. We *have* to do this because we are not prepared, in this bottom-line, empirical, and no-nonsense world, to receive it with the wonder and mystery with which it was originally told.

But try to imagine how it must have sounded in first-century ears. Mary's words as recorded in the first chapter of Luke give us a clue:

*A devout maiden . . . the manifestation of a presence . . . favor with God . . . an unbelievable promise . . . a miraculous conception . . . the very stars and angels rejoicing at the birth of the Savior . . . brightness in a manger . . . glory come to earth!*

Without mystery, who do we think we are? What have we become, in our sophistication and cynicism? How shall we be redeemed until our hearts are tender again?

We speak of the gospel, the good news of Christ's coming to save us all. But we cannot really hear the gospel until we see the mystery, until we can see more than the bare story, until we can feel surprised by grace.

The writer Annie Dillard knows. There is nothing we church people resemble more, she suggests, than a bunch of "*cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute. We stand around having coffee with the tour leaders, smiling and joking and making small talk, oblivious of what the Absolute is really about.*"

This is what judgment is all about: Being in the presence of greatness and mystery and not recognizing it, not liking it, not falling down on one's face to worship it. Judgment is about being there when a miracle occurs and not seeing it.

Tell me, what did you see at The Pig the other afternoon? Was there any mystery?

And the morning you sat in the doctor's office, filled with real people, people of flesh and blood, people with personal problems, people with hopes and joys and despair? Did you see any mystery there?

How about at the hairdresser's, with all those women hoping to be a little more beautiful, to evoke a gleam in their husbands' eyes, making their plans for the holidays? Did you see any mystery there, or hear any?

And here in church today—with each person bringing with them the reality and the mystery of their daily lives—who they are, what they are involved in, how they suffer, the little pleasures that keep them going—do you sense that? Do we sense that?

If we don't, it's a judgment on us. Christmas, unfortunately, is filled with judgment. That's one reason we think about John the Baptist at the beginning of Advent.

Because John pronounced the judgment of God on the people of Israel and said that the Christ who would follow him, whose shoes he was unworthy to loosen and remove, would come with a flailing fork in his hand, to separate the wheat and the chaff, the good stuff and the bad.

The gospel is always two-edged. It speaks of grace, but it brings judgment upon those who cannot receive the grace. Too often, that means us. We cannot receive the grace. We cannot see the mystery.

We don't fall down and worship, because our hearts are filled with inconsequential things.

Gerald Coffee was a captain in the U.S. Navy whose plane was downed over North Vietnam during our country's war with that nation. He spent years as a POW, confined in a small cell. He wrote a book about his experience, *Beyond Survival* :

*It was his third Christmas in prison, in 1968. He recalled it because it was the Christmas the Vietnamese distributed some candy bars to the prisoners. The candy bars were wrapped in foil that was red on the outside and silver on the inside. Coffee flattened one wrapper and folded it into an origami swan. Then he flattened the second, folded it into crisp little pleats, tied the pleats in the center with a thread and fanned out the edges to make a rosette.*

*Outside his cell, he heard the guards laughing and talking with their families. They were observing the holiday together. Most of the day he heard a little boy of three or four, the son of the head guard, playing on the floor with a toy car. It reminded Coffee of his own*

sons.

*There was one more wrapper. He began folding it, not sure what he would fashion. It ended up a star. How appropriate, he thought, a star of Bethlehem!*

*Removing three straws from the broom in his cell, he attached the paper ornaments to them. Then he jammed the straws into a crack in the wall above his bed, and sat watching them in the light from the yellow bulb that always shone in his cell.*

*He thought about the simplicity of Christ's birth, and of what it had meant in his own life. It was his faith, he realized, that was sustaining him through his imprisonment.*

*Here there was nothing to distract me from the awesomeness of Christmas— no commercialism, no presents, little food. I was beginning to appreciate my own spirituality, because I had been stripped of everything by which I had measured my identity: rank, uniform, money, family. Yet I continued to find strength within. I realized that although I was hurting and lonely and scared, this might be the most significant Christmas of my life."*

Think of that! The most significant Christmas of his life—in a bare prison cell, with three paper ornaments dangling from straws in the wall. He was tuned-in to the mystery, to the transcendent message of Christmas.

We probably won't go that far, forgoing all the hustle and bustle, the packages and decorations, the food and frivolity. But we can keep the image in our minds of that little cell and the three homemade ornaments.

And we can use it to correct our excesses, to remind ourselves of the real meaning of Christmas, and to focus, as well as we can, on what he called the "awesomeness" of it all.

It is pretty awesome, isn't it? God getting in touch with a human being. God preparing to come in the flesh for our salvation.

*Teach us, O Lord, to wait humbly before you and to see the beauty and mystery enshrined in this season, that it may lead to our redemption in the midst of everything. For Christ's sake. Amen.*