

What's your favorite mystery novel or movie? Maybe you're a fan of a classic like Rear Window, or you like a good M. Night Shyamalan thriller. The longest running drama on TV, Law and Order, is a who-done-it, with twists and turns meant to keep us guessing. You may have attended a murder mystery dinner theatre, like the one our youth had a couple years ago. My three year old Loves when I hide and surprise him. And who doesn't enjoy a good surprise birthday party? Mystery is part of the reason we wrap presents.

But are surprise and suspense and mystery all the same? They at least all have elements of mystery: they rely on the unknown. But the majority of what we refer to as mystery is only tangentially related to mystery, kind of like the beauty aisle at Walgreens is only a little bit related to beauty as an attribute of God.

Most of what we refer to as mystery is really only suspense. And here's why. Suspense is the moment before we find out the answer. That there is an answer is never in doubt. This assumption that there is an explanation for everything is how we have imagined our world ever since the 18th century and the Enlightenment. We presume science can solve any problem. We just have to learn enough to be able to make the right choices or create the right vaccine or use the right tool or follow the right diet.

We've also imagined our Christianity this way. If we just know God enough, we'll be able to make the right choices. WWJD bracelets were based on this. But not yet knowing how to do something is not the same as mystery. Not yet knowing something that can be known is suspense. True mystery is the things that cannot be explained.¹

God is not an answer to a problem. God is not achievable. God will not be controlled. Or understood. Or comprehended. God is a mystery and will always be a mystery. After we die we won't "get" God. We won't suddenly comprehend God. We will forever grow into the unknown, forever be surprised by more newness and more life and more love. And who doesn't love a good surprise?

What I want to suggest today is that mystery is not just something to be endured until we get to the answer. Mystery is a way of experiencing the unknowable. Suspense can cause a great deal of anxiety or fear. But mystery doesn't have to do that. Mystery can be something we seek out and rest in. It can be a place to meet God and grow faith. So join us now as we worship this God who calls us beyond ourselves, beyond our abilities and reasonings into God's very being.

Message

In this series we have looked at what's called the Wesleyan quadrilateral. It's four means by which we can know God: through Tradition, Reason, Scripture, and Experience. As we talked

¹ C.S. Lewis talked about the thick and the thin things of religion. Some religions primarily focus on things like ethics and moral ideals, the thin things of religion. Others focus primarily focus on the things like blood sacrifice and incantations, the thick things of religion. Lewis chose Christianity because it was the only religion that balanced the thick and thin.

about these categories this summer, at the end of each one, we had a sermon that says tradition is great, but... it has limits and here are its limits and why we also need these other categories. So this sermon is at the end of the section on Reason. Last week JR discussed how faith and science are not at odds with one another. The week before Josh talked about how we can have the mind of Christ. At the end of this section on reason, we are asking “What are the limits of reason?”

It is extremely important that we use reason to know God, that we recognize our experiences, reflect on our experiences, order them, give them names, describe what we have known, share it with others. But. Here is our danger. Whatever we say about God, our words will necessarily limit God. Reason helps us understand truth, helps us hold onto truth and pass it to others, but it cannot contain truth. God is much more than our conception of God, much more than our words. The longer I’ve been teaching theology, the more I’ve come to see that good theology does not explain God. It does not arrive at answers that satisfy our curiosity and longings. The best theology enlivens our curiosity, it invites us to something beyond itself, invites us into a fuller mystery.

[Sea Image] Have you ever sat on a beach and watched the sunset, with the sun growing larger as it descended into the ocean, so that you almost felt like you could touch it, and you kinda thought that if you jumped in and swam, you may be able to catch the falling sun, or at least be swallowed up in it? And maybe you sat there another hour after sunset as the sky darkened and stars began to appear, and the vastness of the ocean felt inviting as its waves crashed toward you and overwhelming as it disappeared on the horizon, and that vastness began to be swallowed up by the unimaginable distances between the earth and the appearing stars and between stars and other stars and between the very stars you’re looking at being the ones our ancestors thousands of years ago looked at, and time and space became more than where your keys were and how long it would take to drive home. And you felt small before things that couldn’t be comprehended. It’s a spiritual experience not because it answers your questions, but precisely because it doesn’t. What we desire in those moments is not for everything to be fixed, but to be opened up to the unknown, the unknowable. To accept the world as it is.

When the ways we talk about God sound like they have THE answer, they become a poor substitute for the immensity and dynamism of God. Our desire for knowing God should never stop with good reasons. Reason should be used to open us up beyond what is reasonable. To call us into the wonder of what can’t be explained.

Of course, mystery isn’t always intriguing. Sometimes it assaults us, and we call that tragedy. When we find ourselves asking, “Why me?,” it’s nearly impossible to give ourselves over to a God we don’t understand. Which is what happened to Job.

At the beginning of the book, Job loses everything. I don’t just mean his house got foreclosed on. I mean something more like a tornado hit and destroyed everything: his life’s work, family

photos, all his bank accounts, two of his kids, his wife, and then disease hit and took the rest of his children and had him in a bad place, covered in sores with pus leaking out uncontrollably.

Job goes and sits by an ash heap, his life burnt to a crisp, and he tries to understand. He desperately wants it to make sense. He sits there for days, thinking. He tries to make excuses for himself, for his children's innocence, for some sense of justice in the world, he even tries to excuse God. As he tries to comprehend, his friends come to help. And they make all kinds of good and reasonable arguments. They make extremely biblically sound arguments. They basically quote scripture verses about how God blesses those who obey and curses those who do not. And we get some THIRTY-FIVE chapters of these reasonable arguments. They aren't just a little confused and need some time to think. This isn't just suspense. It's a true mystery. Finally, Job gets completely fed up, to the point where he's willing to risk his life by accusing God directly.

And then God responds. God responds not with answers, but with a barrage of questions. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Do you control the rain? The thunder? The seas? Do you care for all the animals of the earth? The behemoth, the leviathan? And that's just a few of them. God asks Job around 70 questions. Try to imagine being asked 70 questions in a row by your boss, or by a parent, or your spouse. Now try to imagine being asked 70 questions by God. Then near the end, God lays down the gauntlet. "Will the one who contends with the almighty correct him? ... Would you declare me guilty that you might be right?"

God responds, but this is not a suspense story. God does not provide answers or give Job a reasonable explanation for suffering in the world. Instead, Job is given a tutorial in mystery.

It's easy for us to hear these questions as God mocking Job. And when we hear God mocking Job, we imagine Job sitting in shame, maybe curled up in the fetal position in the corner. But I wonder if we might read these questions differently. They are certainly a challenge to Job's arguments, but perhaps that challenge is more of an invitation into mystery, a letting go of certainty, than it is a condemnation. Could it be that the sense of shame we feel on Job's behalf comes largely from our expectation for answers?

In 70 questions, God walks through much of the workings of creation. As I read and reread these questions. I began to have that sense of sitting on the beach and watching the sun go down and the stars come out. Perhaps we can read God's questions and find ourselves safe in the hands of a God who is greater than ... greater than sea monsters and the mountains and the oceans and the solar system and the vast distances between galaxies of billions of stars. Greater than us and all of our problems. And then we might be able to hear more than sarcasm in God's final question, "Would you declare me guilty that you might be right?"

What is really at stake when we want God to fit into our reason? Are we putting God on trial?

Fundamental to mystery is the distance between creator and created. And this is something we can rest in. We can breathe deep and take in the reality that our God is greater than all our answers to all the problems. We are not in a story of suspense, just waiting to figure out the answers to all the problems. No. Fundamentally, we inhabit a mystery. None of us, even coming together and having thousands of years to think about it, could have conceived of the work of Christ's death on the cross. This is a great mystery far beyond our understanding. And no matter how much thinking and reason and explanation we have assigned to Jesus' death and resurrection, no matter how books have been written, we do not understand or comprehend what happens to us when we believe.

20, to 30 years after Christ's death and resurrection, Paul often wrote to churches about the mystery of Christ. Of course he uses words and explains experiences, and tries to make sense of what has happened. But at no time does he say, "Look here, it's all very reasonable and makes perfect sense." In fact, he regularly does the opposite.

[Scripture Slide 1] 1 Corinthians is written to a church having a lot of problems. One of their major problems is leadership. The church is splitting into different factions all following different leaders, to the point that this church that Paul planted and loved into existence is now strongly challenging his authority. If we were in Paul's shoes, we would likely lay out all the reasonable explanations of scripture and of his own authority, and Paul does some of this, but that's not where he begins or where he puts the emphasis of his appeal to them.

He begins by giving thanks, then notes the divisions in the church, and then says Christ sent him there "to preach the gospel—and not with clever speech, so that the cross of Christ would not become useless." That's an interesting phrase. Clever speech risks making the cross of Christ useless. Clever speech, reasonable understandings, end in themselves. They don't point beyond themselves to the person of Christ.

He goes on to explain in vs 18, **The message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God.**

A couple of verses later in vs 22-23, he elaborates, **It is foolish to the Jews, who ask for signs from heaven. And it is foolish to the Greeks, who seek human wisdom. So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense. -- 1 Corinthians 1:18, 22-23**

The Jews were expecting a Messiah who would do great signs and wonders and accomplish the miracle of running out the overwhelmingly powerful Roman empire. Greeks and Romans were enamored with philosophy and wise explanations of the world. God's work in the world in the person of Christ didn't fit either of their expectations. Paul would preach, "You've come here today looking for miracles, or wisdom, but I give you a mystery – Christ crucified."

Paul goes on describing the foolishness of God that confounds the wisdom of humans. In chpt 2 vs 7, he says, **The wisdom we speak of is the mystery of God—his plan that was previously**

hidden, even though he made it for our ultimate glory before the world began. But the rulers of this world have not understood it; if they had, they would not have crucified our glorious Lord. - 1 Corinthians 2:7-8

I love that phrase, “the wisdom of God, hidden in a mystery.” And Paul does not then explain the mystery. He talks about it, but what he talks about is not explanation. It is testimony to the transformative power of the cross – that upside down way of thinking that Josh told us about a couple of weeks ago. It is the mind of Christ - The first shall be last. The Son of God becomes the servant. Anyone who wants to save her life must lose it. The things of the Spirit cannot be understood, they can simply be pointed out. Hey, look at this! This is God at work.

Remember the question from Job, “Will the one who contends with the almighty correct him?” Now, listen to how Paul ends this section about the mystery of the cross with an incredible paradox.

“Who can know the Lord’s thoughts? Who knows enough to teach him?” But we understand these things, for we have the mind of Christ. -- 1 Corinthians 2:16”

Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to advise him? And yet, we have been given the mind of Christ. This is a paradox, a great mystery. But it’s not one we need to fix. It’s one we can rest in.

I don’t know what that means to have the mind of Christ. I don’t know how it’s possible. But I can witness its reality, its effects. And this is faith—to testify about the power of God that sometimes appears foolish to our reason.

Fundamental to mystery is the distance between creator and created. And this is something we can rest in. We can breathe deep and take in the reality that our God is greater than all our answers to all the problems in the world. Let’s take a couple of deep breaths now and let that truth sink into us.

And God has revealed the greatest mystery of all to us—THE answer, Christ crucified, foolishness to our wisdom and a stumbling block to our expectations.

When I was just a boy, 11 years old, all the reasons and explanations I’d ever been given about life and my religion got broken when my father suffered a severe head injury. We were a good family. My parents were both leaders at the church and sacrificed a great deal to give a lot of money to missions and non profits. My brother and I attended a Christian school where my mom taught for peanuts. Obviously, I could go on. But I’m sure most all of us have our “Why me?” stories.

People tried to give me reasons for why my dad was taken away. For years people gave me all kinds of reasons. None of them satisfied. I desperately longed to understand. But all the

reasoning I found only intensified my hurt. They either made God seem cruel, or made me feel great shame.

The only comfort I found was weeping at the altar of my church. God met me there. God's presence didn't make sense, didn't explain what had occurred or why, but God's presence healed me. And here I am trying to put words to what can't be put into words, I'm trying to make it sound reasonable--when it's not. The places I have most learned to rest in God are the places that are beyond my ability to reason to understand God. This is true despite the fact that I've spent my entire life studying and teaching theology.

We have a tradition we practice weekly here. It is a mystery I'd like to invite you into. It enacts Jesus' presence on our little earth.

On the night Christ was betrayed. Incarnate God took a towel and washed the feet of his disciples. They protested. This was not the messiah they expected. This was not the Messiah they wanted. After washing their feet, they ate, and he took bread and broke it and said "this is my body, broken for you." He then took wine and said, "This is my blood poured out for you." And he commanded them, "Do this in remembrance of me."

[Communion Slide] Today, as we take communion, we testify to the mysterious work of God in our lives. How this is Christ's body and blood is a mystery to us. How Christ's body and blood transforms us is a mystery. Yet we have found this mystery to be true. And so we remember this morning the most mysterious and the most deeply true thing about ourselves: that God became a man, suffered and died for our sakes, and has invited us to have eternal lives by also dying and being raised by God's Spirit to new life.

You do not need to be a member at Catalyst to join us this morning. If you desire to experience the mystery of Christ, you are welcome at this table.

Before we come up, though, I'd like to lead us in a prayer of examen. This is a way for us to take a few minutes to consider the significance of mystery. I'm going to ask three questions and we'll have a minute of silence after each question. When you are finished, you're welcome to come up to this table.

Examen

1. When in your life have you asked the question, "Why me?"
2. Has God ever been present to you in a mystery?
3. Where in the coming week might you have the opportunity to rest in the mystery of God's healing presence?

Prayer

God, the great mystery, you have invited us here today to be wrapped up the great mystery of our faith. We confess that we often want to explain you, control you, understand you. Thank you for showing us today that you are always bigger than our answers and our questions. Thank

you for reminding us that you offer us not certainty, but assurance of presence. We come now to the table you have set for us to be swept up into your great mystery. As we receive these wafers and grape juice, may they become a spiritual food for us. May we find rest in your great love for us, a rest that goes beyond answers and certainty into the heart of faith. We offer these prayers and approach your table in the name of your son, Jesus.