

Message: Jesus, a Mystery Revealed

Do you like a mystery?

There are many kinds of mysteries. There are mystery novels featuring detectives like Agatha Christie, Sherlock Holmes, Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys. There are games where people try to figure out mysteries, such as charades, “Wheel of Fortune,” and “Twenty Questions.” Other mysteries are found in illusion, sleight-of-hand and stage shows featuring famous magicians such as David Copperfield and Harry Houdini. There are shows where people hide in plain sight, waiting for others to discover mysterious facts about them, including “The Dating Game,” “You Bet Your Life,” and “What’s My Line?”

Most of us like mysteries for several reasons. First, there’s the initial anticipation when we are posed with a question that has no obvious answer. Next, we feel the excitement of the pursuit. As we seek to solve the mystery, we are often confronted with twists and turns, dead ends and confusing facts, where the things we find out seem to contradict each other. There is enjoyment to the suspense. Finally, there’s the thrill of finding the answer, the satisfaction of solving a challenging and complex puzzle that stumps everyone. There can even be awe at the elegance of the answer we find at the end of our journey.

The Gospel of Mark is believed to be a retelling of the mysterious things the apostle Peter heard and experienced during the time he spent with Jesus. **Mark is a book focused on answering a central question, “who is Jesus?”** The answer is more mysterious, satisfying and awe-inspiring than it first appears. Everyone who reads Mark’s account of Jesus’ public life comes away with a thrill when they realize the answer to the question, satisfaction in understanding the complexity of the answer, and awe at the depth and elegance of Christ’s message of good news. We find out who Jesus is on our journey of faith.

During this church year, we will spend a fair amount of time studying the Gospel of Mark. It’s helpful to look at the background as we begin. Most scholars believe the author is John Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, mentioned in Colossians 4:10. John is the man’s Jewish name, while Mark is his Roman name. Mark is writing to a Gentile audience, most

likely a Roman audience. We know that because he gives translations of names, definitions of phrases, uses Latin terms and explains Jewish religious rites.

Scholars believe Mark grew up in Jerusalem and was a young man during the time of Jesus’ ministry. If he is Barnabas’ cousin, then Mark traveled with Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary trip. Later on, he was an associate of Peter. Scholars who study the structure of the book believe Mark wrote his book in the way he did in order to capture the witness Peter gave through his sermons. Scholars believe the book was written between 64-67 AD, between the deaths of Peter and Paul.

Each of the four Gospels is written by a different author to a different audience for a different purpose. Mark’s book is unique in several ways. First, it is by far the shortest of the Gospels with only sixteen chapters. The narrative is also written in the simplest way. That doesn’t mean the ideas and concepts are simple, but the language is terse.

Mark’s retelling of Jesus’ baptism in v9 takes 17 words, “*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.*” We then get a description of John, followed by a miraculous, mysterious revelation. That’s a pretty brief way to tell us about God.

Luke, Matthew and John tell the story of Jesus’ baptism in different ways. In their books, John is more involved with the people coming to the river. In contrast, John is only present to reveal Jesus to the people of Israel in the first chapter of Mark. Mark’s shorter version reveals the answer to the question, “who is Jesus?” right up front. But it does so in a way that leaves us with a lot of questions about the mysterious way Jesus was baptized, who he is and who else appeared that day.

What is the mystery? What was revealed? The mystery is revealed in v11, “...*a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’*” Jesus is the Son of God, separate from God, yet God’s only beloved Son. That statement, recorded in such a simple way, changes all of creation forever. Jesus is the promised One, the Messiah sent by God to save us. Halleluia! Mark starts his Gospel narrative by telling us that good news. We will spend a good part of this year looking at what it means to us.

But there is so much more that’s mysterious in vv10-11. First, **why was Jesus baptized if he did not sin?** Jesus did so to fulfill Scripture and to identify with the people of Israel and all of humanity. That’s a simple thing to say, but a difficult thing to comprehend. The God of the universe, the one who created the sun, moon and stars, was baptized to give meaning to the visible through his invisible grace.

A second mystery is v10 when Mark tells us the “*heavens were torn apart*”– this could only have been a divine act. Some sort of mysterious tearing, opening or dividing happened to the physical and spiritual realms. Most certainly there was a spiritual manifestation. Heaven was opened and those who were spiritually awake experienced it. John 1:32-34 tells us John the Baptist saw the Spirit descend on Jesus in the form of a dove, so we know others witnessed the event.

There are two further mysteries to consider. First is God’s Spirit, which appears as a dove, descending from heaven. This image of the Spirit is gentle and peaceful, a source of grace and blessing. That’s a powerful image. It’s different from the more common images we have of the Holy Spirit: the flames over the apostles’ heads at Pentecost in Acts 2:3, the breath of God over the waters of the void in Genesis 1:2, and the Spirit as the very breath of life in Genesis 1:30. The Holy Spirit is distinct and separate from Christ and God in heaven.

Second is the voice coming from heaven, the voice of God. Who else would call Jesus “Son” and “Beloved”? Who else would find pleasure, good or contentment in this simple act of Jesus? God’s contentment is not in the physical act itself, but in the obedience of Christ to God’s will. Jesus is beginning his public ministry with the mission to save humanity from our sins. God the Creator, Father, El-Shaddai, is God Almighty, the one with the power to cleave the physical and spiritual world, revealing to us a glimpse of the true nature of God. Jesus’ baptism is a revelation of God in the simplest, and yet most profound way.

Why is it difficult to understand? You may be thinking, “what’s the big deal?” What’s so mysterious about God’s revelation? Isn’t that the purpose of God’s Word? And you would be right. God’s Word is a record of humanity’s experience of God as revealed to us. We know

that. But we have the advantage of almost 2,000 years of history to learn the story. We know the story of Jesus’ baptism. We’ve heard sermons on it before. Pastors have sought to dissect the language and meaning of the passages in all different ways. It’s hard to get a fresh reading that impacts us and stirs up a sense of mystery or awe. Let’s face it, we’re too familiar with the spiritual lingo, but not familiar enough with the spiritual depth of the deep waters that lie before us.

Let’s try is this way. Close your eyes for a moment and imagine you are in the desert in mid-August. It’s hot. You can feel the sun beating down on you. To combat the heat, you are dressed in comfortable clothes, perhaps shorts and sandals. You hear there’s something interesting happening on the other side of the park and you see people going that way. As you join the crowd, you hear people talking about “the man” and his powerful words. You see people with wet clothes heading back your way; they are excited and full of energy.

Your interest is peaked. You wonder if there’s some reality TV show being filmed. It might be fun to participate and maybe you could get lucky and get something out of it. You finally see the man and he is unique! He’s standing in the water, speaking to the people on the bank. He has long, tangled hair, a bushy beard and a loud voice. Most dramatic of all are his piercing eyes, which seem to look right into you. You feel like he can hear what you’re thinking. There isn’t anything you can hide from him. His words are strange to your ears. “Repent? Repent for what? I haven’t done anything wrong!” That’s what you tell yourself, but your heart says something different. You know you were unkind yesterday, you cut someone off on the highway and ignored the poor person begging at the street corner. The man’s name is John.

A man in a linen robe goes into the water, walks up to John and speaks quietly to him. After a moment, John nods and then he dunks this mysterious man under the water, speaking words over him. As the man comes up out of the water, there’s a tremendous “CRACK” of thunder directly overhead, with clouds swirling and a roaring sound. A minute ago the sky was sunny and clear. The sun is still shining, but there’s a strange cloud overhead with beams of light coming down. From nowhere, a dove flies down and lands on the man’s outstretched arm. You

hear a rumbling sound and feel a voice resonate inside you saying, “*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*” It isn’t really a voice, but you feel it in your whole being. You are filled with a sense of overwhelming awe.

You look up and see a clear, sunny sky. The dove has disappeared. John embraces the mysterious man and they leave the water, speaking quietly together. The crowd is stunned into silence, milling around as if unsure what to do. You don’t know who the mysterious man is, but you want to know more about him and about what happened.

You are confused. You know the stories and things people say. God is infinite, all-powerful, all-seeing, all-knowing and eternal. God is transcendent, as far above people as we are above a bacterium. God is the Creator of the universe. Yet you saw the man in the water, watched the dove come down and felt the voice. He is human and yet he is clearly more than that. There were three presences you cannot explain, but you know they are as real, mysterious and as active in the world as anyone. These presences are powerful, majestic and supernatural. They are present in your life and in the lives of everyone who gathered this afternoon. (*You can open your eyes.*)

How do you make sense of the mystery of God? The word “Trinity” doesn’t appear anywhere in the Bible, yet we see the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, present in the baptism of Jesus. God’s mysterious nature – three in one and one in three, is clearly revealed. Trinity or Triune God, these are words humans have used to describe God. We struggle to understand a mystery that is both simple and deep. It is a mystery that begins, continues and ends in God by grace.

What’s next? Do we need to seek the depths of the mystery? For some of us, the answer is yes. We are drawn to the mystery of God as a challenge, a puzzle we must follow because that’s the way God teaches us and draws us closer. It is an important part of our walk of faith. For others, the answer may be no. It’s always good to grow in our knowledge of God, but we are called to act, serving and loving others as a way to show our faith. We find God when we look into the eyes of those we serve. For most of us, the answer is a combination of the two.

Works cannot save, yet faith without works is dead. As we begin a new year together, I pray you will be led to the banks of the river and the mystery of our faith. May you find your way to the path of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, we open our heart, mind and spirit to you. Reveal to us the mystery of the ages: Jesus is the Son of God. Let us hear the rending of heaven, see the Spirit descending as a dove and feel the presence of Your Voice in our inner being. Open us to the mystery of faith and show us how we might wade in the waters of faith while diving deep into your grace. Halleluia, El-Shaddai, Holy God! We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Isaiah 42:1-9 (NRSV)

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching. Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

Mark 1:4-11 (NRSV)

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."