

Alone with Mystery (Luke 2:1-7)

Life changes when babies enter your life, doesn't it? When that happy event occurs, you begin to discover that your life isn't your own anymore. In the immediate aftermath of that event, someone else determines when you sleep and when you get up, or how often you get up when you intend to sleep. Someone else determines when you feed them, change them, bathe them, and comfort them. Someone else determines what you use your money for—men who felt at home roaming the aisles at Home Depot now find themselves baffled searching for stuff they didn't know they'd need at Babies R us. Someone else determines how much stuff you'll take with you when you head out the door. In short, that little someone now runs a major portion of your life—you've become a parent, a different person than you were before.

All of that was on the threshold for Mary as she laid her firstborn child, a son, in the manger that first night. But in the relative quiet of that moment, before the excited shepherds arrived, another layer surely surrounded Mary's thought, a layer of mystery, for the babe in the manger, ordinary as he appeared, was no ordinary child—Mary knew this better than anyone. The angel who announced the circumstances of his birth had called him the Son of God, and said that “the Lord will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom would never end.” We hear this story from the perspective of history—we know how the story ends, so the wording makes sense to us. But what might Mary have imagined? In what Mary understood within the context of her culture, the angel's announcement probably sounded like monarchy—Son of God was a term attached to Israel's king in their history—does she imagine Jesus eventually overthrowing Herod and assuming the Davidic throne? Though that familiar paradigm fits within her understanding, the conception was anything but familiar—how does that fit in? And then there's that bit from what the angel told Joseph separately—that Jesus would save his people from sin—what might that mean, and how does she go about raising the Son of God? Apart from all the normal considerations a newborn brings, Mary is, for the moment, alone with the mystery of what has just occurred and what the future holds. What does it mean, and what's her part in it?

We're in a bit of a contemporary mystery as we wonder what the future holds. For us there are two frames of perspective to it: 1) the larger story of what's transpiring around us, and 2) the personal story of how it affects us. The larger story finds us asking the question: where is history headed? And as people of faith we're asking: how is God acting to guide the future? The familiar paradigm into which we've settled where everything pretty much goes on as before with incremental progress towards improvement has become a less reliable indicator of our future. Instead we find a global pandemic degrading life physically and socially. We find it crippling national economies and challenging the capacity of health care systems to keep up with the demands. Behind this, of course, lies the anxiety of infection and the rising toll of lives lost. There is global grief, frustration, fear, even anger. Racial strife has been sweeping the country and echoed around the world simmering just below the surface of society ready to boil over with the next flashpoint. We're experiencing a politically polarized and divided country where suspicion, skepticism, and cynicism are pushing strident groups towards violence. We're seeing global intrigue where nations jockey for leverage upsetting historic alliances that kept tension from breaking out into open conflict. What we've counted on for equilibrium is slipping away despite frantic attempts to hang on to it. The world, and our place in it is experiencing massive disorientation, and in the face of this, the promise of peace on earth and goodwill towards all rings hollow this year. As never before people are asking, “What now?” And “where do we go from here?”

The larger story has impacted our personal stories. The challenges of this massive disorientation are demanding, affecting how we work, whether we work, how our children receive their education, whether or how we engage in aspects of life that previously relieved pressure, that refreshed the spirit, that brought joy. Our concerns about the health and well-being of elderly parents or family members with compromising health issues multiply. And though there's hope with vaccines just rolling out, it will be a while before the immediate crisis is averted. Concerns about financial security mount as businesses close, we are furloughed,

we tap into savings or retirement accounts to augment basic needs. Not knowing how or when this will all end invites despair to settle in. As Christ followers there may well be an added layer of concern in all of this as we privately wonder: where is the abundant life Jesus promised in all of this? And here we find ourselves, like Mary, alone with mystery—of a different sort, but equally compelling. Everything familiar or anticipated has been swept away. The new “normal,” or at least a normal that’s still emerging appears for us as Christ followers pretty much as it appears to everyone else. The lives we’re living in the moment don’t seem much different from what we see happening around us, and we wonder: what does my future hold? And what is my part in it?

There is mystery unfolding in your life as a Christ follower, and the good news is that’s it’s unlike the mystery consuming popular opinion. This mystery is described in Colossians 1:27 as “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” Because of your profession of faith in Christ, you have become, and are still becoming someone new, someone different than you were prior to Christ, and someone different from everyone else. You are a unique expression of Christ’s life present in you. Becoming a follower of Jesus isn’t a cookie-cutter process where you are pressed into a mold so that a pre-conceived version of Christ’s life is baked into you meaning that you resemble every other Christ follower. There may be common elements in how that life is nurtured, but you are a one-off, singular expression of Christ in the world that’s never been seen before and won’t be repeated. What’s happening in you—the mystery—is a mingling of Christ’s spirit with yours that transforms your inner being to become the person Christ would be were he living in your place and situation. Your personal history, your experiences, your heritage, your understanding, your abilities and talents, your insights, your aspirations, your personality are being woven together with the mind of Christ so that all you are becomes the vessel of bearing Christ in the world living in union with the Father who is acting in history through you glorifying God as your life displays God’s character guided by the mind of Christ.

This is all interior work taking place at the seat of your being from where your identity is formed. We are, each of us, alone with this mystery. Mary may well have wondered how she would raise the Son of God—she was alone with this mystery as she gazed at the babe in the manger. We likewise are alone with this mystery as we ponder how the Son of God is being raised in us. Our celebration of Christ’s birth causes us to consider his birth in us, that according to Christ’s own word actually represents our new birth in him. And this moment of celebration is an occasion for reflection on how that process is developing, or growing to maturity in us.

Christ in you is the hope of glory. Hope is the confident expectation of promises given, the anticipation of promised outcomes. And glory is the express or realization of God’s character. So the mystery with which we are each alone isn’t a question about our circumstances, but the reflection upon our person.

Jesus was born into a world of strife, disappointment, frustration, and despair. None of this prevented him from conveying the character of God. Despite opposition and incredible challenge, Jesus lived a beautiful life, and made that same quality of life available to his followers, who lived so deeply into it that they were said to be turning their world upside down. They likely didn’t know all of what that meant. What they did know is what they had become: vessels of blessing in whom Christ dwelt, ordinary in most respects, but displaying the character of Christ in ways that caught the attention of the world around them.

In this Advent season on the doorstep of Christmas, as you celebrate the birth of Jesus, how is the mystery unfolding in your life? Remember, this is all interior work—it’s the kind of reflection only you can do—as you ponder the process, do you find anger dissolving into mercy, contempt giving way to respect, fear melting into confidence, despair folding into hope? What is occupying your thought? On what is your mind set? How open are you to this mystery developing in you? Christ has indeed come, but what is there to celebrate unless he fully occupies your heart? We can’t know exactly what the future holds, but we can know who we will be as we face it. And this may well be the substance of your praying in the days, weeks, months, and years ahead. Perhaps it is as simple as this: Lord, allow me to be the person you

envision I am; guide me into the sufficiency of your grace for the transformation developing in my inner being.

How will this play out in your life? Only God knows the ultimate fruit that will come from your life glorifying Christ as you live in that trust. But the adventure of your life is finding where that trust will lead. The mystery is at work in you—let it work. AMEN