

Embracing Mystery (John 6:24-35)

Like many of you, I've been watching Olympics. I'm partial to the winter version of Olympics, though I enjoy the swimming competition and gymnastics. My cousins, Klaus and Bill, were gymnasts in college though they never reached Olympic levels in their sport. But in conversation with them, and watching them tumble across front lawns, I gained a bit of insight into the challenges of gymnastics. So when Simon Biles withdrew from the competition citing a case of what she called, "the twisties," though I didn't understand that from personal experience, the newsfeeds noted that gymnasts knew exactly what she was talking about; it is the sense of losing the ability to control the twists that they incorporate in their routines, and not knowing where they are in space as this happens. How they know that while performing is a mystery to me. I imagine that Carol Young's daughter, Katrina, knows this as well given her discipline of platform diving. She too, would have to know where she is in space to execute her dive as planned. It's a mystery to outsiders—and it's likely a bit of a mystery to insiders as well—it's just that they have learned how to relax into that mystery so that it works in their favor.

Something of that meets us in our text for today. In truth, Jesus and the life he lived and offers is flavored with mystery. But it's not mystery in the sense of a detective novel where one follows clues to solve the mystery present in solving a crime. It's more the sense a gymnast or platform diver experiences—a mystery into which they relax and learn to follow that leads them into amazing outcomes.

The crowd of people profiled in our text were faced with mystery as they experienced the presence of Jesus. The context of this passage begins at the start of chapter six which describes a great crowd converging on a place to which Jesus had retreated with his disciples. It was intended to be a remote place, away from the public eye, for in other gospel accounts we learn that just prior to this moment, Jesus had been informed that his cousin, John the Baptist, had been put to death by Herod. Seeking a place of solace and refuge to grieve, he was nevertheless besieged by people who had seen what the gospel writer called "miraculous signs" he had performed on the sick, and they evidently wanted more of that. Other gospel accounts tell us that when Jesus saw the crowd gathering, he had compassion on them and began to teach. As the day stretched into late afternoon, Jesus realized the crowd's need for nourishment—remember that they were in a remote place—which led to the multiplication of loaves and fishes from provisions intended for one that met the need of all present—5000 men in addition to women and children also there.

As you might imagine, this had quite an effect on the crowd, and it's worth noting that it was the miraculous sign that mesmerized the crowd, not the teaching they had received. Seeing what Jesus had done, according to John's account, they immediately decided that Jesus was who they wanted as their king, and they intended to make that happen by force. In one sense, you can hardly blame them. They likely lived hand to mouth in their agrarian society—always a precarious way to live. Farming is a livelihood where you can do all the right things and still lose a crop on which you rely. Crop insurance didn't exist, and the government under which they lived didn't provide assistance. If anything, it only added to the burden insisting on taxes regardless of circumstances. A person who had the power to multiply abundance in the face of scarcity would certainly be the ideal candidate to lead them away from the oppressive occupation of Rome while providing for their needs. What's not to like about that?

Knowing this, Jesus withdrew himself from their immediate presence to thwart their plan. When evening came, he sent his disciples away, by boat, to Capernaum while he remained behind for the solace in solitude he had hoped for. Just here, as a side note we need a moment to consider that Jesus, living fully into the power of God's life, though fully human still needed time and space to grieve the loss of his cousin. He was not immune to grief; he was not untouched by sorrow, meaning that he knows firsthand how grief impacts us. He needed space to mourn, perhaps to question the turn of events in John's life, to process its injustice, to receive God's comfort. Jesus doesn't begrudge our need to mourn when grief touches our lives. Likewise he understands the inner turmoil we experience, he knows the roller

coaster of emotions that grip us; he doesn't hold that against us, neither does he set about to "put us right" in the moment—he does sit with us in our grief and assures us that we are secure in his grip as our emotions are eventually exhausted. And there's no expiration date on this—he's there always even when we can't sense him.

This too, was the disciples experience that night on the lake, that had become stormy and imperiled them. Try as they did, they were being engulfed by the storm, when, quite unexpectedly and full of mystery, Jesus came to them, walking on the water—when he joined them in the boat, the storm stilled and they reached their destination. It was an outcome they could not have anticipated, but welcomed. They were learning to live with mystery.

On the other side of the lake is where our text for today picks up. The crowd still searching for Jesus discovered him with the disciples, though they apparently knew he had not accompanied them when the disciples set out. So they asked, "Rabbi, when did you get here?" Which, in truth is probably more like "How did you get here?" They were ready for more wonders to be revealed to support their intentions. Jesus skirted the question by revealing their motivation for him to be what they desire of him rather than to consider who he is and how that opens up a larger horizon of God's intent for them through him. In other words, Jesus said there is something greater at stake here than the satisfaction of temporary need, as pressing as that might be. Still hoping to effect an outcome they produce, the crowd asked: "What must we do to do the works God requires?" And lingering unspoken in the back of their minds was the rest of the question: so that we gain the outcome we hope for...

The answer they received was simple: "The work of God is this: to believe in the one God has sent." Which then brings up a puzzling response from the crowd who were clamoring after Jesus on the basis of wonders they had witnessed and experienced: "What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you?" As though the miraculous sign of multiplying the loaves and fishes the day before was insufficient. At the end of this exchange, as we heard in its reading, the conclusion Jesus gave is that he himself is the miraculous sign whom God has sent—he is, as John introduced him at the beginning of his gospel, the Word made flesh, mystery, but reality.

There are at least two points to quickly note from this that come to bear on us. The first is this: We, like the crowd in this account, can easily fall into the trap of making Jesus out to be what we want of him. This happens when we view him through the lens of our own history or experience, assuming that Jesus wants what we want, therefore we are willing to project our outcomes as his. This is problematic for a host of reasons, not the least of which is that it obscures our blind spots in self-reflection. Our personal history, experiences, and dare I add privilege, are not the metrics by which the intent of Jesus is measured. They are included, but are not comprehensive. What has proved sufficient for us is not necessarily sufficient for others whose history, experiences, and privilege differ from ours. Which doesn't mean that Christ is somehow insufficient for some, but that the means by which Christ extends sufficiency to others is bridled by satisfaction in those meant to convey it. Simply put we can be blind to the needs of others when our needs have been met, and we can become deaf to the cries of the suffering, the oppressed, the disadvantaged when these are not our particular issues. Worse yet, we can blame others for their plight by judging them faithless or weak. Moreover, we can misrepresent the cause of Christ by promoting our version of Jesus over and above the picture of him in the biblical record—and when those who claim to know Jesus personally assert a view of him that is callous towards suffering, indignity, and oppression, what hope can people unfamiliar with him have in discovering his true identity? Jesus is not ours to mold into an image that meets our need—this is idolatry. We are his to mold into people whose inner life intertwines with the life and love of God that blesses rather than blames, that has compassion rather than condemnation, that refreshes rather than remands. The mystery is not that God enfleshed in Jesus could be this way, but that we who follow him can be this way.

Which leads us to the second point: we are people more inclined to certainty than mystery. Our Western minds amid the times in which we live are not very comfortable with mystery. We're more inclined to reason, to intellectual knowledge, to empiricism—mystery to us is considered fantasy, magical thinking, delusion. We're pragmatic, we think in economic

terms: what's the bottom line? Universities are graduating fewer with Humanities degrees, and more with STEM majors for these degrees have higher earning potentials. We're becoming more efficient, more proficient, and less human in the process. Character is less our concern, ethics have become situational, and faith in our culture is largely derided as magical. Which isn't to say that this hasn't had an effect on the content of our faith which leans into the direction of certainty. Many of our larger faith communities are built around individuals who declare with certainty that they know the mind of God, which position them more in a combative rather than a compassionate stance with culture.

Friends, God is ultimate mystery—revealed in the Word made flesh, but no less mystery that defies the grasp of finite mind, but is not beyond the experience of lived reality. Just as gymnasts and platform divers learn to trust the mystery that produces amazing outcomes, Christ followers, in pursuit of what Jesus provides, learn to move with the mystery of God's Spirit leading them into unanticipated outcomes marvelous to behold. We either cling to certainty that our finite thought prefers, or we embrace mystery trusting in the Word made flesh towards a future we can't predict, but one that will include all of what God intends for all whom God loves. AMEN