

“Mastery and Mystery”

*Sermon preached by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean, VA*

Graduate Recognition Sunday

June 7, 2009

Isaiah 6:1-8, John 3:1-10

Our first reading comes from the book of the prophet Isaiah. The passage describes the prophet's dramatic experience of the call of God during 740 or 739 B.C., the year that Uzziah, the King of Judah, died. The first thirty-nine chapters of the book of Isaiah were likely written during the stormy period of the expansion of the Assyrian empire - an empire which overthrew the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 and served as an ongoing threat to Judah during Isaiah's lifetime. As a prophet, Isaiah spoke words of challenge and comfort to his nation's leaders and its people. Listen to how Isaiah recounts the vision through which he sensed the call of God to do just that. Note how it is shrouded in mystery.

Read Isaiah here.

Our second scripture lesson comes from the Gospel of John. Over the course of the past several weeks, we've heard from John's gospel a number of times, most of those readings coming from John's account of Jesus farewell address to the disciples on the night before his arrest. Today's passage comes much earlier in the Gospel, and it describes Jesus encounter with the Pharisee Nicodemus. Up to this point in John's gospel, not much has happened. Jesus has been baptized, he's called a few disciples, he's turned water into wine at a wedding feast at Cana, and he's created a ruckus in the Temple by turning over the tables of the moneychangers. Some buzz has developed around him. A few verses before our passage begins, John says of Jesus, "Many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing." That's when Nicodemus, a Pharisee, shows up, at night, under cover of darkness, to check this guy out.

Now as a Pharisee, Nicodemus would have been a serious student of Hebrew scripture, one who felt qualified to instruct others as to its meaning, particularly concerning how one lived in obedience to Torah, the Jewish law. So it is as one teacher to another that Nicodemus comes to hear what Jesus has to say. Listen for how Nicodemus and Jesus seem to be on totally different wavelengths.

Read John here.

Thanks to an old high school friend I've been reacquainted with on Facebook, I was reminded on Monday of this past week that he and I graduated from high school exactly twenty-five years before to the day. Some of you are thinking, "He's still a mere child." And I hope the younger ones among you are thinking, "Wow, Pastor Aaron, I didn't know you were *that old!*" Anyway, that anniversary has me reminiscing back on wearing a cap and gown myself, and not just the green one with the red tassel I wore as a graduate of J.L. McCullough High School in The Woodlands, Texas. (I was a Highlander. Go

Highlanders!) I don't remember a thing about what the commencement speaker said that night, though I do remember being mostly glad and a little sad that this chapter of my life was over. I have clearer memories of my graduation from college, when I wore the more traditional black cap and gown. Then-Speaker of the House Jim Wright gave the commencement address, in the midst of his ethics investigation. He told us to "accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative, and don't miss with Mr. in-between." I had the same bittersweet feeling that day as I had when I graduated from high school. But this week, I've been thinking even more about my graduation from seminary with a Master of Divinity degree. Not only did I get to wear a cap and gown, I got to wear a hood. Graduate degree in hand, call to a church in front of me, I remember thinking that I was pretty well equipped. After all, I knew lots of stuff about God. I had training. I had a Master of Divinity degree! Hey, I could even explain the doctrine of the Trinity!

The Trinity, I learned, is a way of trying to name the different experiences people have of God. You might think of it as the way we experience the Sun, s-u-n. You have the Sun, that distant blazing ball of fire ninety-three million miles from Earth. When we speak of God as a transcendent Father, it is that experience we are trying to name, though Jesus seems to have a much more intimate relationship with the One he calls Father than that. Then there is the light we see emanating from the Sun, the rays of sunlight that we can see. That's like Jesus, the S-o-n, the visible presence of God in human flesh, a person who was fully human and somehow fully God, a model for us of how to fully embody the love of God in the world. And then, finally, there is the warmth we feel when the Sun's rays touch our skin. This is the Spirit, the warmth of God's presence not just beyond us, not just beside us, but somehow experienced within us. God beyond us, God beside us - visible to us, God within us. There you have it. The mystery of the Trinity explained. And you didn't even need to get a Master of Divinity degree!

It is an ironic title for a degree: Master of Divinity. As if the divine is something that can be mastered, controlled, put in a box, instead of being a living God who is beyond our mastery and manipulation, a God who retains an air of ineffable mystery through which even our best intellectual efforts can't quite penetrate. In churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples we try our best to make sense of life in light of something larger than just ourselves. We preach and hear sermons that seek to help us understand sacred scripture and how we should live our lives in response to it. And that is good, as far as it goes.

I know people have told me that they appreciate having something they can think about and apply to their lives through the week. But no matter how many clever ways we can come up with to try to explain the Trinity, or how many bits and pieces of the history of ancient Israel, or how much we know about how the Bible came to be pieced together; no matter how many practical sermons we hear or preach about how to put our faith into practice through prayer, forgiveness, or hospitality, we eventually come up against a mystery that cannot be fully explained. It can only be encountered and experienced.

No matter how much information we learn in high school, college, or graduate school classrooms, no matter how much knowledge we can glean from the Internet, the library, and the History Channel, we eventually come up against a mystery that cannot be fully explained and can only be encountered and experienced.

We come into contact with that mystery in the birth of the child. I remember when my older daughter Rebecca was born. I was amazed. Judith said, "It's a Rebecca!" I just wept, stunned, by the gift. It was a mystery. I'd been through health class. I knew well how babies are made and how they gestate. But when you witness the miracle of a brand new life coming into the world, you've rubbed up against mystery.

When you see how different siblings can be (as when my daughter Martha came along and was different than Rebecca) though they both draw from the same gene pool and have basically the same environmental upbringing, you've bumped into mystery.

When you stand out on a mesa under a clear New Mexico night sky, as I did in the spring of 1986 on a retreat to Ghost Ranch, and you look up into the heavens spangled with millions of stars, you've encountered mystery.

When you fall up in love, I mean really fall in love, for the first time, or the second, or the third, you know something about mystery.

So much of our lives seem to be about mastery: mastering our circumstances, being the masters of our domain, mastering our subject areas. Mastery is what Northern Virginia is all about. But there is a limit to mastery.

Tom Troeger, who now teaches preaching at Yale, but once taught at a seminary in Denver, speaks to the limits of mastery in one of his books.

*"I once heard a sound bite on the evening news that captured something of the illusory human understandings that faithful preaching dispels by pointing to our utter dependence upon God. We had been through several dry summers in Colorado, followed by winters with less than average snowfall. The prognostication was for severe drought and hazardous fires. Then, in late March, the mountains were hit with massive snowstorms; and there were giant accumulations of snow, bringing the promise of adequate water. There was great celebration in the newspaper. People talked about the welcome storms at parties and at work. But before the snow began to melt, the mountains were buffeted by a sirocco, an intensely arid, hot wind. The snow evaporated into the air, and never became available to us as water in our streams and reservoirs. After the winds ceased and the snow disappeared, an expert from the water management bureau said on the late night news: "It was an event that management could neither predict nor control."'*¹

You don't get to be a pastor, or a human being for that matter, for very long before you bump up against events that you can neither predict nor control. In the first church I served, I remember standing by the bedside of a thirty-three year old woman, with two elementary aged children, as she died with a brain tumor. We surrounded her, holding hands and praying, her mom, her sister, her children and I, as she passed from this life into the next. Her early death was an event that we could neither predict nor control. We could only respond to it.

When Nicodemus came to Jesus, he came as a Pharisee. And what the Pharisees were all about, in my estimation, was trying to manage and control God. “If we just behave the right way, then God will be good to us. So we’ve got to get it right, every jot and tittle. And not only that, but we can manage God so well that we know who is in and who is out. We can tell you about how God works.”

Nicodemus comes to Jesus because he’s intrigued. And Jesus says, “*You have to be born from above, Nicodemus.*” And Nicodemus, who doesn’t show much grasp of metaphor, says, “What is this guy talking about? This is not mastery. This is not literal truth he’s talking about. I don’t get it.” So Jesus tries again. “*It’s like the wind. It blows where it pleases. You don’t know where it is coming from or where it is going, but it works. That’s what life in the Spirit is about.*” Nicodemus says, “*How can this be?*” And Jesus responds, “*Are you a teacher of Israel, and you don’t understand about mystery?*”

I imagine Jesus continuing. “You don’t understand that there is mystery at the heart of God? You don’t get it that we can’t manipulate God through our actions?” You don’t know about how God came to Abraham and Sarah and promised them a son, even though Abraham was almost a hundred years old and Sarah was pushing ninety? You don’t know about how God delivered the Israelites by parting the Red Sea, and making a way where there seemed to be no way? You don’t know about how God came to Isaiah in the temple, and overwhelmed him with holiness? You are a teacher of Israel, and you don’t understand about mystery?”

Earlier in this service, Jim Stover handed out a book to our high school graduates, a book called *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*. It is the story of Le Chambon, a village in France populated by French Huguenots, Calvinists. Not exactly Presbyterians, but close enough. When they saw events swirling around them that they could not predict or control, they responded by letting the Spirit of God work in them. They risked life and limb to protect their Jewish neighbors from extermination by the Nazis. It is a mystery, really. Anytime someone gives of themselves, it is a mystery. It is a mystery on the battlefield. It is a mystery in the classroom. It is a mystery whenever you see it.

So graduates, and the rest of you, and me. Master everything you can. But also respond to the mystery of God’s love revealed in you - *in you*.

In Jesus’ name.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

¹ From Thomas Troeger, “Keeping in Touch with God,” a chapter written for Jana Childers book, *The Purposes of Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), p. 125.