



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“SITTING WITH THE MYSTERY”

Scripture Lessons: Exodus 24:12-18; Luke 9:28-36

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, March 3, 2019
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Luke 9:28-36

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, ‘Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah’—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, ‘This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!’ When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

This week our family brought a new puppy into our home. His name is Marshall, and he’s named for the street on which my grandparents lived over on Sullivan’s Island – Marshall Boulevard. The whole ordeal of excitement and expectation around our puppy reminded me of the time when we brought something much more significant into our family...a second child.

Harrison is our firstborn and so, as you might imagine, we wanted to tell him in just the right way and at just the right time. When we did, Harrison was clearly and visibly thrilled, so much so that later that afternoon he took us upstairs to his room in order to show us something that was very important to him. Upon entering his room we noticed there on the floor, carefully arranged into two neat rows, were all of Harrison’s plastic swords.

Martha Ann looked in traumatized amazement at the display of weaponry, and then she turned to me and offered the kind of smile which communicated loud and clear, "Where in the world did he get all these swords?" I, in turn, offered the kind of smile which communicated a measure of honest guilt with a splash of apology.

Our moment of marital bliss was thankfully interrupted by a tug on our arms. Harrison pulled us closer and proceeded to tell us that the one larger row, which clearly consisted of the nicest swords, he was going to keep for himself, but, the row with the fewer swords, the older and sometimes broken ones – well, they were for his sibling.

Harrison went on to say that there was really no need to wait for the baby...that he was ready. It was apparent that one of us needed to explain things to him in a little more detail, and knowing that, I looked in Martha Ann's direction and kindly said, "not it."

Martha Ann went on to explain very well the need for us to wait for his little brother, basically talking with him about the miracle of life in ways that he could understand; nevertheless, we could tell by the look in his eyes that there was still a great deal of wonderment going on in his young mind. Before we left the room, Martha Ann said, "Do you understand?" And Harrison looking up from his swords which he had already begun to play with again, responded, "Yes ma'am."

You know, children have a wonderful way of accepting the limits of understanding. When faced with the unknown, a child may raise a thousand and one questions, but more often than not, they will accept some semblance of understanding, all the while resting peacefully on just this side of complete knowledge. The Apostle Paul's words ring wonderfully true. "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child..."

I have found that children will often accept the unexplainable for what it is...unexplainable. And yet somewhere along the line on our journey to adulthood, the mystery of it all, it loses something of its allure...we become disenchanted with its awe and wonder...and mystery becomes something we work to solve. Ah, "when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways..." we might say.

Oh, how much time do we spend - how many billions of dollars do we invest toward the goal of unlocking life's mysteries; understanding the secrets of the universe...of medicine...and, yes, even faith. At a very basic level the mystery of God is what the Transfiguration story is all about. And yet, it is only natural for us to look at this story and to try and explain away the mystery.

We get excited when we look at the Old Testament and notice how the account of God and Moses shares so much in common with the story of Christ's Transfiguration. We pay attention to the similarity of details...there's a mountain, we see a cloud, we hear a voice...we witness God's glory...and so it is understandable, if not unavoidable, that we place Jesus' Transfiguration within the context of some of God's greatest revelatory events. We rightly perceive the presence of Moses and Elijah as confirmation of who Jesus was and is and who he will forever be, proof positive, as it were, that the road which lay ahead of Jesus was not only paved in fulfillment of the law and the prophets, but, that it was chiefly designed by none other than the will and intention of God, and it was that way from the very beginning.

These are some of the things we can affirm as we seek to understand the mysteries of God...and it's good that we think deeply about such matters; however, once we presume to have God figured out; once we lose that sense of awe and wonder - well, then we have a problem! You see, the minute we claim to comprehend it all, the minute we categorize and compartmentalize God and build a booth in order to commemorate the event...ah, the minute we delight in knowing what we know...pray we would be reminded of the words in today's lesson: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

And so we listen...we listen as the Scriptures testify to the glory of God...we hear the great many stories which talk about other human encounters with God's mystery and God's majesty. We see Moses encounter God at a burning bush...we see Elisha wave goodbye to his mentor Elijah who rides off into the sunset on a heavenly chariot...we see Isaiah receive his call from God in part, in the form of hot coals touching his mouth...and we can learn about God from all of these stories, we really can, but we will never know all there is to know about God - we will never be able to fathom the depths of God's providence, how God is at work in the world around us...at least for the time being as the Apostle Paul has reminded us, "We see in a mirror dimly."

Perhaps we should ponder what it means that we have not seen a bush that is burning but not consumed or looked up in the sky and seen a chariot or felt hot coals upon our tongues? And yet we have seen such things, have we not - through the inward witness of the Holy Spirit as such stories are read and proclaimed through the years? We see the lame man pick up his mat and walk; we see how a couple of fish and a few loaves of bread become food enough for thousands, and we hear those stories, and we build our booths! We put God on a shelf and say, "There's God, right there...nice and tidy," as if we have God figured out!

In about three months from now - on Memorial Day weekend, we will go back to one service throughout the summer. It happens that the chamber singers from the First Presbyterian Church in Spartanburg, South Carolina will have performed as part of our community's Piccolo Spoleto festival that week. Dan and Ricard are working out the details, but it looks as though that group of singers may join us and perhaps assist our own choir that Sunday morning. I know

their Director, Holt Andrews, very well, seeing as we served on staff together at First Church, Spartanburg, for my first five years out of seminary.

I share that connection with you because on that church's campus in Spartanburg is a lovely stone chapel, and what has always stayed with me is the fact that a very important element of "mystery" has been maintained within the chapel's architectural design. You see, no matter where one sits in that little chapel, which is probably no bigger than our own Lilly chapel...no matter where one sits, it is impossible to see the entire chapel; because, there is, from any seat an angle, an arch, a recessed window, a rail...something which intentionally obscures the chapel from being seen in its entirety.

In this way, and for all those who would care to pay attention, that wonderful little chapel serves as a reminder – a testimony, if you will, to the mystery of God; to the fact that we cannot know everything; we cannot tell exactly what God is up to. As the author of Ecclesiastes has reminded us: "[God] has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end."

Should we try to discern the will of God? Of course! We need to study God's Word so that we can represent it to the very best of our ability...but we also need to come to terms with the limits of our ability – the limits of our authority – the limits of our understanding. Because there will always be things that we cannot comprehend about the wondrous workings of God, but that's ok. It's alright to sit with the mystery. In fact, I would argue that God's people everywhere would do well to spend more time embracing the mystery of God.

I dare say that one of the biggest problems for the church today is that she does not sit long enough with that mystery; far too hasty has she become in terms of determining exactly how God is at work in this situation or that one. Perhaps a great gift we can give to Christ's Church as well as to ourselves, is a willingness to dwell longer still with the transcendence of God, to be open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit which are in accordance with the Scriptures...that our lives would be infused with a little more excitement about the unknown...and a little less expectancy, a little more wonder...and a little less familiarity.

Tell me, should we not be overwhelmed by the very nature of God's love for us? "That while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us!" I mean, we know who we are, we know what we have done and what we have left undone – that the God of all creation would set his love upon us? That God in Jesus Christ would choose to say, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you."

Friends, when Jesus says that, he saying that he loves us in the same way that the Father loves him. Oh, I don't think we will ever fully fathom the extent of God's love. Maybe we would do well to sit with that for a while. Like our son, Harrison, many years ago, but perhaps with a

touch of maturity that comes with the passing of years, when we too are faced with the grandeur of the risen Christ, perhaps our most faithful utterance would be: “Yes, Lord. I believe. Help my unbelief.”

I don't think that is such a bad thing to say at all, because the truth is, we won't ever know why everything happens, and as it does. We will never have all of the answers. So much of life will - and, quite frankly, should -- remain a mystery to us...but mystery is not a bad thing – it is a God thing!

The Apostle Paul put it well when he said: “Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great: “He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.*