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January 31, 2010

The Greatest Mystery of All

Text: St. Luke 4:21-30

Everyone loves a good mystery. I don't think, however, that the reasons why we do are themselves a mystery. In the first place, what we tend to like about mysteries is the drama, for drama is the essence of life itself. Our lives are rarely certain, and mysteries in a very focused way – and at a safe distance – highlight this uncertainty, and even magnify it. As a result a good mystery lets us see the possibilities of life in the midst of uncertainty. It can reveal the consequences, good and bad, of choices that human beings make. In really good mystery writers, such as Dorothy Sayers or P.D. James, the mystery itself can almost be secondary to the moral characters of the people that act out the drama of the mystery. And even in lesser writers, the uncertainty that is the mystery allows us to participate vicariously in the dangers and uncertainties of life.

The second thing, though, that I think we tend to like about mysteries is that in the end, they are resolved. At the end, we learn whodunit, and we learn why Professor Plum murdered the maid in the library with the rope. In this sense, mysteries are not unlike puzzles, even like crossword puzzles, which give us a sort of intellectual excitement when they are unsolved, but which in the end are always soluble. When we do solve them, the solution gives us a great sense of satisfaction, for it brings everything into order and certainty once again. So, in the first instance we like the excitement of uncertainty, but in the end we want it solved. To be sure, sometimes the reader is left hanging, but a mystery writer can get away with doing that for only so long. Readers demand the satisfaction of a solved puzzle, and a writer who never solved it

would ultimately be regarded as lazy or incompetent or out of touch with his audience. We need to know how it turns out, and we need to know why it turns out the way it does. Uncertainty that is all danger and that goes on forever is intolerable. Uncertainty and evil unresolved teach us nothing, leaving us standing in constant tension or fear.

Now, there are mysteries in religion, too, but proper mysteries in religion are quite unlike the mysteries of puzzles or mystery novels, for real mysteries in religion are never resolved. There are, of course, certain kinds of puzzles in the study of religion that scholars like to concentrate on. These are mysteries such as who really wrote certain books in the Bible, or what happened to the original ending of the Gospel of Mark. Banal mysteries such as these fill the pages of scholarly journals; giving a really good solution to any of them can guarantee a professor's reputation and get her tenure. When journalists need a really juicy quote they will call these mystery solvers. But in the religion that we practice on a day to day basis, the really interesting, and also most frustrating and amazing mysteries are not of this sort at all. In our religion, there are deep mysteries that seem to have no solution whatsoever, no matter how hard we try to figure them out. This morning I want us to think about two of the most important of these unresolved mysteries.

The first of these is the mystery of evil. This mystery appears to us in the first instance as the entrance of evil into a creation that God made very good. It is unknown where it ever could have come from. Blaming it on a talking snake won't do any good since that only pushes the problem back. We still have no idea how the snake got the ideas that he did. But that isn't really even the greatest of mysteries surrounding evil. What is even more deeply mysterious is the fact that we actually do know *how* evil comes into human life, but when we are honest about it, we have no idea of why it keeps happening time and time again.

How does evil come into human life? Well, in the first place it is because people make bad choices. That isn't the whole story on evil, but it is an important part of it. People choose the worse over the better. Although, as many philosophers have argued, the one moral rule that we are hardwired for is to choose the better over the worse, somehow people choose the worse over the better all the time. For some philosophers, that was not an unsolvable mystery. Socrates, for example, maintained that every human being, good or bad, acted in order to realize the good; people always chose the better over the worse, at least the better as it *appeared* to them. So even a Hitler acts on what he thinks he is the best. The problem, Socrates argued, is that such people are ignorant about what really is best. So, the solution to the evil brought about by bad choices is simply education. You have to get people to recognize what is really good, and get them to distinguish it from what is only apparently and superficially good.

Socrates was an optimist, and as a result evil was no unresolvable mystery to his mind, even though it was a perpetual problem. It had a solution. But even though he had a point, a good point, about the moral importance of education, numerous Christian thinkers have found that he was, indeed, overly optimistic. For what thinkers like St. Paul and Augustine discovered about human beings -- and they first discovered this fact about themselves -- was that even when they knew what was good, they chose the worse anyhow. Even when they had in front of them what they really wanted, they turned away from it and did the opposite. That truly is an unresolvable mystery. For there is in such choices absolutely and literally no good reason to choose as one does. There's no credible motive. Even though it may not be in one's self interest, even though one knows that something else is better, one goes ahead and does the bad thing anyhow. Think simply about what we mean when we say that somebody cuts his nose off to spite his face. That is nutty, irrational, bad choosing and yet we do it all the time.

As an illustration consider here the story that we read this morning in the Gospel according to Luke. There Jesus in the first public act of his ministry stands up in the synagogue in Nazareth and reads these words of promise: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” He then closes the scroll and simply declares, “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” At first, his friends and relatives are pleased with what he says. This is the hometown boy made good. But then he goes on to tell them, that no prophet is accepted in his hometown, and that historically, it was often the foreigners, not the kinsmen, who were healed by prophets such as he. As a result, the townspeople get very angry and almost kill him.

In short, their ultimate reaction was one of scepticism and outright rejection, and when upbraided for it, one of hostility and rage. Now, this rejection is a dark mystery. Israel had waited so long for deliverance; the people anticipated eagerly the fulfillment of the ancient prophecy. And what do they do when it comes? What do they do when they are told explicitly that it is fulfilled? They stand on ego and turn their backs on it. The very thing that they want, they reject. That is not understandable; it is a mystery. The early church could never quite make sense of it, other than reasoning that it was because of this rejection that the Gentiles were allowed to enter into Israel’s promise.

Now, unfortunately, the church in subsequent years made this surprising rejection the basis of a prejudice against Judaism, and often used it as a reason to persecute and punish Jews. That is another bad choice for it rejects God’s own choice of a people. It is a bit of hypocrisy, too, for the problem that Jesus encountered early in his ministry with his kinfolk did not stop there, it has repeated itself time and time again in the church. It was repeated by St. Peter when

he denied that he even knew Jesus, just at the moment that his friend was being led away to his death. It is repeated by those who bring their children forth for baptism, make promises for them and never again bring them to church. It is repeated by those who regularly attend church, but excuse themselves from the demands of the gospel in business and politics, and who bring violence into their personal relations. This rejection is repeated daily by those who say they believe but fail to give good news to the poor, who refuse to proclaim release to the captive, sight to the blind and who refuse to let the oppressed go free. It is, in short, repeated each time after baptism that we act as if nothing happened two thousand years ago.

That is a great mystery. How could we so consistently choose the worse over the better? It is even more mysterious in our case than in the case of Jesus' first hearers since for us the better way has been put so plainly before us. As one novelist put it, if humankind were at all aware what good God has meant for us and how we have so callously rejected it, we would despair of our lives. How we could possibly continue to live as the world has always lived even after it has been proclaimed that the words of the prophet have been fulfilled is a deep and impenetrable mystery.

That is, indeed, a great mystery, and it is a very, very dark one. But it is not the greatest mystery of all. For the greatest mystery of all is that despite all the betrayal and rejection, what Jesus said that morning in Nazareth is true, namely, that "today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." The greatest mystery of all is that despite the mystery of evil – of rejection, faithlessness, and betrayal, of choosing the worse over the better, even to our own hurt – that good triumphs. That is the mystery of grace.

This mystery of grace is a mystery that is present in everyone who has chosen the worse and who yet does not get what he or she deserves, but who somehow is made better. For it is the

greatest mystery of all that even though dark mysteries of violence and destruction - including self-destruction -- overshadow us that we do not have to be destroyed but, despite what we have chosen in the past, may actually have our eyes opened to goodness and light; it is a great mystery that we can be set free from lives that have become meaningless and sometimes even vicious. It is the greatest mystery of all that evil does not overcome us, and that despite what we have been and done that we can still become friends of God.

This mystery of God's grace is the mystery that lies behind so many other holy mysteries. It is at the heart of creation, for a world coming out of nothing is grace just as a good life coming out of a life of nothingness is a matter of grace. It is at the heart of the mystery of Christ's Incarnation, Passion and Resurrection, for out of human sinfulness came not rejection by God, but God's entering into human life to bring human lives into God's life. It is the mystery of how out of human violence came Christ's patience and humility and how out of his death came the Resurrection, not only for him but for the whole world.

And it is a mystery that comes in very small ways as well, for this is the mystery that takes the destroyed life of the alcoholic or drug addict and puts it back together again. It is what lets a guy say he is sorry when never before has he admitted error in his life. It is what lets those who have lost their virtue in the heat of argument find their way back again to respectful conversation. This mystery of grace is, in short, sight for the morally blind, food for the spiritually malnourished, freedom for those who have been bound in sin and sorrow.

Because this grace does happen in so many small ways, and so often, we sometimes take it for granted and assume that it is small, and no solution for the larger problems of the world. But this mystery of grace that gives goodness to life is so common not because it is insignificant but because the prophecy has been fulfilled this day. Its fulfillment is something that we often

resist in many big and large ways, yet it really is fulfilled and so cannot ultimately be resisted, and cannot be defeated no matter how we try. That is why it can be so common, for it is what is most real.

There is a great deal of comfort in that, for to believe it is to know that there is in the end nothing that can separate us from the love of God – neither principalities, nor height nor depth, not even our own stubbornness and obtuseness. Every tear will be wiped dry. God has set out to redeem his creation in Christ, and in Christ he has done so. The jury is *not* still out on this, no matter how hard people try to leave it still up in the air. That is comforting to know, especially at times we most need forgiveness and to be changed.

But the point of this mystery is not just comfort; there is also a challenge to us in this mystery. For if this is the way the world really is, if grace is ultimate, and we know it, then we clearly need to order our lives to grace, to start making good choices again, and we need to proclaim to others in word and deed and in our own acts of grace that God's promise is fulfilled. There is in this mystery of grace a challenge to each and every one of us everyday to let that fulfillment to be seen in our lives and to proclaim that fulfillment. It is a challenge to proclaim the fulfillment of the prophet's word in a world that like Jesus' own time mysteriously resists it.

That may seem an impossible task; the world forever is choosing the worse over the better. But your own lives can be witness to the mystery of grace. *You* can be witnesses to the greatest mystery of all, namely, that resistance is not forever, and that grace does triumph.

So, may grace indeed triumph in your lives, this day and forever more and may your lives forever be a mystery to everybody around you.