

“Living in the Mystery”

Acts 3:1-10/Luke 4:38-44

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1st Presbyterian Church of Sharon

By Rev. Dr. Glenn Hink

I. Introduction

Children are comfortable with mysteries in life. For kids there’s still a little magic here and there. And not everything needs to make rational, scientific sense. At least that was true for me. And I see it in my grandsons.

Take the Bermuda Triangle. Why do so many ships and planes go down there? And why aren’t they found? Where do they go? Or how about Stonehenge? How was it built, and why? Or how about the Ark in the Old Testament? What happened to it? The Indiana Jones movie “Raiders of the Lost Ark” gives an answer. What if it’s true? And how does gravity work? And what is love? And what’s beyond the edge of the universe? And what about Santa and Area 51? For children mystery is part of the fabric of life. The world is open to surprises and bigger than we know.

But somehow along the way we lose our comfort with mystery. We come to believe that to be adult means embracing scientific rationalism. We come to believe that all mysteries must have reasonable answers. We come to believe that mystery is silly and child-like. We come to live as if the world is closed to surprise and smaller.

But not everyone. I recently watched a movie on the Dutch artist Vincent Van Gogh. It’s called “Loving Vincent.” And the movie makes a point of Van Gogh’s comfort with mystery. He was fascinated with the wonder, beauty, and mystery of everyday things and people; fiery sunflowers in a vase, irises that sway in a garden, a wheatfield with crows and a dirt road that mysteriously goes somewhere, a joyful peasant family that look a little like the potatoes they eat, the thoughtful portrait of a postman, and of course, stars in the swirling night sky. Van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo, “Looking at the stars always makes me dream.” Beauty, wonder and mystery, that sounds like a good dream to me. And it makes life more. I would like to be like that; humble enough to live with mystery.

II. Texts and Brief Exegesis

The stories from the Bible today are about mystery. They are about healing and preaching that changes lives. They are about a world that is open to the love and power of God. These are good things, I think, about which to wonder.

In the first reading from Luke 4 Jesus' ministry is just beginning. He is in Capernaum, a significant fishing town and trade center on the Sea of Galilee. It's no small, backwater town. It appears to be the center of Jesus' early ministry. The story happens just before he calls his 12 disciples.

In the first part of the story Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law. She's sick with a fever. When Jesus enters Peter's house people there ask Jesus about the fever. Jesus then goes to her and "rebukes the fever." The belief at the time was that most illnesses were the result of evil spirits, so this healing is also a type of exorcism.

The next part of the story is a type of summary of Jesus' ministry. It's the evening of the Sabbath, so when the sun goes down people bring the sick and possessed to Jesus. Jesus lays hands on them. Healings and exorcisms happened. Jesus has a growing reputation as a healer.

And he had a reputation as a preacher. He made God's word plain in fresh, new ways. So Jesus moved from synagogue to synagogue and was welcome. People came to listen and to wonder.

Healing and preaching, people experienced something special, something of God in what Jesus did and said. Jesus called it "the kingdom of God," the future reign and rule of God breaking into this world now. It was a big mystery. But people saw it. And felt it.

The second reading this morning is from the book of Acts. Bill and I will be preaching through Acts this summer. And the big thing Acts wants to do is tell the story about the ministry of Jesus continuing and expanding through the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit in the Church. The risen and ascended Christ is present with the believers through the Holy Spirit, so they also heal and preach like Jesus.

Read Acts 3:1-10.

This clearly is a healing story. If it sounds like a "Jesus healing story," that's intentional.

It begins with a man lame from birth. His life is hard. Some days a few friends carry him to the Beautiful Gate entrance to the Temple and he begs. He has no other hope than to live by the few crumbs the more fortunate give him. Perhaps by the gate of the Temple religious people would be reminded they are to give alms to the poor. That is his life.

The context for the healing is interesting. It is 3 o'clock in the afternoon, the time of prayer in the Temple. People are arriving to share in the prayer. A priest would sacrifice a lamb for the sins of the people and incense would be burned to go with the prayers of the people to God. A priest would lead in corporate confessions of sin. Then would be a time of individual prayer. Peter and John go to the Temple to be part of those prayers.

But at the Beautiful Gate their way to prayer is interrupted by the lame beggar. The man does not know Peter and John from any of the other people who stream by. But Peter's response

to the request for alms is something the lame man has never heard before:” Look at us. I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk” (Act 3:7). And taking him by the hands Peter pulled him up. And the man stood and walked, leaping and praising God. Lame from birth, now for the first time he walks. The mystery of a miracle has happened, and many people have seen it.

One of the things the story tells us is that the power and presence of the Holy God is not just present in the Temple. Rather, that power and presence is also known through the name of Jesus Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the risen and ascended Christ is present in his name. Note Peter does not just generically say, “Be healed,” nor imagine that the power for healing resides in himself, “I say be healed.” Rather he is very clear that the power for healing is in the name and presence of Jesus Christ. So there is more mystery.

And like Jesus, the miracle gives Peter an opportunity to preach. So he will tell them about the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is all about the long-awaited kingdom of God breaking into this world now. The risen Jesus Christ is the Messiah, the Savior, the Lord. And the mystery of his power and presence now resides in the Church and those who believe. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the ministry and mission of Jesus continues and expands. And another miracle happens as Peter preaches; more people come to believe.

III. Brief Theological Reflections

So let’s talk about the “elephant in the room”; what do we believe about miracles? What do we believe about the healings in the stories? Do they have some type of “modern explanation?” Or is there room for some mystery in life?

Most New Testament theologians, both conservative and liberal, agree that Jesus was known as a miracle worker. He was a preacher, a teacher, a theologian, a prophet, a social revolutionary, and a healer. Miracles and healing were a part of what he did and for what he was known. And as the story of the early Church is told in Acts, that same power for healing seems to be happening.

So how do modern 21st C people understand miracles and healing? Perhaps some think, “that was then, this is now”; miracles happened then with Jesus and the beginning of the Church because it was needed, but not now. Others think that miracles aren’t really literal miracles; rather they are metaphors for spiritual things. So lameness stands for paralyzed in guilt, and healing means forgiveness so to follow Jesus. Blindness stands for failure to believe and seeing means comprehending who Jesus is. Leprosy means being a social outcast, and healing means being welcome to a community. Metaphors. Still others think that miracles still happen, but in a natural way; medicine, science, discovery, technology, chance, and coincidence. And of course there’s the literal understanding; miracles and healing happened and still happen.

And then there are questions and problems with miracles and healing. Why do prayers for a person appear to bring a miracle, but prayers for other people do not? Is God arbitrary? If a

miracle doesn't happen, is it because of my lack of faith? Is there a proper way to pray for a miracle; a formula through which the power of God flows? Is the power of God diminished? Do a few people still have the spiritual gift of healing? Is there less need for miracles today? And as con artists and miracle workers scam people out of their trust and money, has skepticism reduced our expectation for miracles?

I found myself thinking about a movie I saw years ago, "Leap of Faith." It's a 1992 movie starring Steve Martin as the con artist/faith healer Jonas Nightengale. Jonas Nightengale has a big show that fills coach buses and support trucks. They travel across the country to big cities where they can make big money. But it so happens they break down in the small town of Rustwater, Kansas. The farming community is struggling through a drought. So Nightengale decides while they're waiting four days for repair parts to arrive, they can do a few shows in Rustwater and make some money.

And so they set up the tent, big sound system, lights, and bleachers. The gospel choir practices. And in the meantime, Nightengale has members of his team go out into the community and learn people's names and stories and hopes and problems. And then that information is brought back and organized. And then during the show, Nightengale wears a small ear piece, the information is told to him, and he shares the information as if it's whispered to him from God. And of course, there's all the drama and razz-ma-tazz of a showman. And so it goes as planned.

But then something "unplanned" happens. A man by the name of Boyd was injured in a car accident. He walks with crutches. His life has become much less. But taken in by Jonas Nightengale and the show, he comes to believe Jonas can heal him. And during one of the shows he comes forward, touches the cross on the stage, and is healed. He drops his crutches and walks. And the small-town crowd knows Boyd's story, so they all sweep onto the stage to celebrate the miracle they have just seen.

At first Jonas Nightengale is angry believing he's been "conned" by people in the town. But then his world begins to be turned upside down. Before he believed faith and God and miracles were all just a con. But now he has been confronted with real faith, a real healing, and the real mystery of God. His life can't be the same. So he quietly packs a bag and under the cover of darkness and leaves it all behind; trucks, tents, staff, and show. He hitches a ride to Florida on a truck. The driver asks Jonas if he's running from something. He replies that for the first time he is not. It's then that a heavy rain starts to fall, ending the drought. And Jonas hangs out the window of the truck thanking Jesus for the rain. And you don't know if that is the sarcasm of unbelief, or the beginning of living in the mystery. I like the ambiguity.

Miracles and healings; "Leap of Faith" puts a number of things together for me. Yes there are miracle workers/con artists. Yes, some of the healings in the Bible seem to have metaphorical meaning. But that doesn't mean they also didn't really happen. Yes, there are lots of prayers, and then miracles don't seem to happen. But every once in a while, one does. Faith seems to matter, but not always. Healings are gifts of God, and not about any power in the healer. Yes, some

miracles do happen through modern means and better understood natural processes. And yes, maybe chance, situation, and circumstance are sometimes part of miracles.

In the end, I believe it's best to be both wise and humble. It's best to believe and leave a place for mystery. It's best to realize that God and God's creation are much more than I can get my head around. And it's best to be a little like Van Gogh; "Looking at the stars always makes me dream."