

**Scripture Reading: I Corinthians 2**

**“1 And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. 2 For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. 3 I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. 4 And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. 6 However, we speak wisdom among those who are mature, yet not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. 7 But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, 8 which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”**

## **“The Mystery of Advent”**

**The second candle of the Advent season has been lit and as I hoped this morning we will focus on the first Advent of Jesus when He came as the little baby in Bethlehem to save His people from their sins.**

➤ **We are going to consider the mystery of the Incarnation of Jesus!**

**We need to understand how it is mysterious because it is a mystery that has changed us, has changed the world and a mystery that we are to proclaim! As I pointed out last Lord’s Day, neither we nor the Church calendar leave Jesus in the manger: Christmas is followed by Epiphany where we see the work of Jesus revealed and then we come to the Easter season where we see the work of Jesus accomplished or fulfilled! There we see clearly the reason that Jesus came, which the angel had proclaimed to Joseph: “do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”**

➤ **That is the simple message of Christmas!**

**That is the message that we are to proclaim to a needy world and we should do so as the angels did with those shepherds on the first Christmas!**

**“Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.**

**11 For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.” 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: 14 “Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”**

**Now that all seems pretty straight forward so why would I speak about the Mystery of Advent?**

➤ **It is not often that we think about the mystery of the Christmas story, but we should!**

**Now first we need to think a bit about “mysteries.” Mysteries fall into two major categories:**

➤ **A mystery can be something I am not able to understand...**

➤ **Or a mystery can be something that has not yet been revealed to me.**

**There are mysteries about the nature and work of God that will never be known to those who are mere creatures.**

**We saw this in our text from last week in Ecclesiastes where King Solomon said, “11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.”**

Now of course if this meant that all we could know about God was mysterious & unknowable we would be in BIG trouble. We must remember that the wonder is that God has revealed Himself to us in ways that we can understand and we should not allow the fact that some of God's ways are unknowable to keep us from rejoicing in what we do know!

That brings us to the second category of mystery and that would be those where something we can understand has not yet been revealed to us... The enjoyment of a good mystery novel is the fact that you are trying to figure out what the author knows from the beginning but is revealing to you over time as you read his book. Kind of ruins them if you skip to the end in an effort to better understand what you are reading!

In our text this morning we heard the Apostle Paul refer to a mystery as he speaks about the power of God: "6 However, we speak wisdom among those who are mature, yet not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. 7 But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, 8 which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."

The incarnation of Jesus in the Christmas accounts is where we begin to see this grand mystery of redemption revealed in history. We must remember that God is working out His plan of redemption in history on His time table, not ours.

We can sit around and speculate about why God does what He does, but it is usually very futile. Why did God allow all of the evil and suffering that we have seen in human history rather than sending Jesus into the Garden right after the fall of Adam? Why did the risen Jesus not come and judge all the earth & set everything in order immediately after His resurrection? It even comes down to asking why as individuals we have sin and suffering in our lives between the time we are baptized into Christ and our death where we go to be with Jesus.

I believe that we do ponder such things because God, "has put eternity in their hearts," as King Solomon said, but we must find our comfort, and our limits in asking such things in the light of the rest of that verse: "except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end."

The Apostle Paul echoes this truth at the end of chapter eleven in his epistle to the Church at Rome:

After eleven chapters of great detail about our salvation, he says this in conclusion: "33 Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! 34 "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?" 35 "Or who has first given to Him And it shall be repaid to him?" 36 For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen."

The coming of Jesus represents both types of mystery and let me give a simple example of them to help us understand what each of them means. Let us say we have a young man of 12 or 13 years of age who has taken a real interest in science and mechanics. His parents as those tasked with his education would of course want to answer any questions he might have and provide him with good resources or teachers to inspire his interest. So the boy comes to them and say that he must know about two things or he is finished with these subjects: He wants to completely understand gravity and the internal combustion engine. Yes, at that point both are complete mysteries to this young inquisitive mind, but they are of different sorts:

- With the engine he can be given courses or books that would explain to him how it works and he can even become a fine mechanic in time.

This is a mystery that is revealed and can be understood.

- All the young man needs there is the patience to learn!

However, when you consider the state of our knowledge today, the understanding or mystery of gravity is a different sort. There the young man would come to understand, as we all have, that with the more you learn, you only realize how much more you have to learn. Gravity is not something this young man can fully understand no matter how many teachers he has or courses he takes.

- He can measure it, describe it and even use it, but the understanding of how it works or even just what it is, is simply beyond his reach.

Here the young man needs to have the humility to understand his limitations as a mere creature and then he can go on to be a great physicist.

This young man could also take two very foolish courses, which are very similar to what sadly far too many do with the Christmas accounts. When it comes to the mystery of the engine he can learn to understand it or he could foolishly say I don't have time for all that learning, I just want to dig in and work on some cars.

- NOT the kind of mechanic we would want to have service our cars!

With regard to the understanding of gravity he could as I said be a humble man and move forward, or he could foolishly say that IF he cannot know EVERYTHING about something so basic then why bother with science!

- Thus, he and the rest of us would lose whatever contributions he could have made in the field of science.

So keep those examples in mind as we unpack the mystery of the Incarnation because both are clearly involved.

- First we must understand that the incarnation of Jesus is much more than just a cute manger scene!

Yes, those manger scenes and all the other traditions that we have at this time of year can be good reminders of the great work that has been done...

- But we must always keep that work central and understand how important it was!

The coming of God as a man is one of the great mysteries of Christendom, both in the fact that it cannot be exhaustively understood, like gravity, but also in how it was revealed just as we can learn about engines. We opened the Advent season last week with one of our oldest hymns that has come down to us, O Come O Come Immanuel. It is based on two verses from the Old and New Testaments and gives us a grand picture of the impact of the Incarnation.

- All the way back in the Garden the Savior was promised as the Seed of the woman who would crush the head of the seed of the serpent.

All throughout the Old Testament He is pictured as a sacrificial lamb and then the Prophet Isaiah more clearly tells the Saints that Messiah will come as a little babe.

Isaiah 7: "14 Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel."

Repeated of course by the Angel who proclaimed the birth of Jesus to Joseph: Matthew 1: "23 "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us."

The mystery of the Incarnation that we cannot as creatures exhaustively understand is how God can become man: God with us! We can describe it and know its power in the same way we do with gravity, but we simply cannot explain how it works as we would that car engine.

- **What we do know is that it was a major and powerful moment in history and that is the part of the mystery that was then revealed.**

**We see it revealed to those alive at that point in history and we see it recorded for all of us to know.**

**I think seeing how it was recorded is important to review. We of course have all of the “hints” if you will in the Old Testament about the coming of Jesus. Jesus Himself told His disciples that they should have known about Him and His work from the Law and the Prophets. Those are the parts of those great mystery novels where you go back and say, ‘I should have known!’ or ‘how did I miss that?’**

- **This is how God chose to tell His story and we should rejoice in it!**

**But now it is time in history for the real event and all is revealed like when the great detective gathers everyone together to explain what happened. Three of the four Gospels accounts begin with the incarnation. Mark begins with the ministry of John because his Gospel account is seen as one of action... Jesus immediately etc.**

**Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus and presents the incarnation from a Jewish perspective with the revelations to Joseph and the account of King Herod’s wickedness. An early reminder that while He came unto His own, they would ultimately reject Him!**

**Luke is writing the orderly account for his Gentile friend and as such gives us the most details about the event and firmly grounds it in Roman history with the census of Caesar Augustus. A reminder that Israel is the “captive that mourns in lonely exile.”**

**Though we don’t often think of it this way, the account from the Apostle John also begins with the incarnation reminding us that it truly does mean that God is with us as he begins with “in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God” and coming down to “and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us!”**

**As we go through the rest of the Advent & Christmas seasons we will sing about and study the many details that were revealed: The parents of Jesus, the relatives of Jesus, the miraculous conception of the virgin Mary, those faithful shepherds and the angel proclamations. We will remember faithful Saints like Simeon and Anna and see wicked men like Herod and his soldiers.**

*[speculate about a second Christmas scene with Herod’s throne & the Temple]*

**Now as I said earlier, it is important to see what has been revealed because it is a mystery that has changed us, a mystery that has changed the world and one that we are to proclaim. As we announce each week in our time of confession and absolution, Jesus has come to save His people from their sins and that has changed US and all who belong to Jesus.**

- **We have been transferred from the Kingdom of darkness into His Kingdom of Light for all eternity!**

**But the Gospel is not just about ME, or even us collectively as the people of God. Yes the Angel Gabriel assured Joseph that Jesus would save His people from their sins, which He did on the cross and confirmed in the power of His resurrection! But we also have the proclamations of the other angels to the shepherds. They said that the birth of Jesus brought “good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. Then the angel was joined by “a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: 14 "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"**

**The message of Christmas is one of Good News, not because it is a cute or clever story about the birth of a baby to poor parents. It is not good news because it is a season where we all seem to get along better...**

- **No, it is Good News because God has entered into history to deal with the problem of sin!**

**It is obviously good news for those who put their faith and trust in Jesus because they can know the joy of forgiveness and look forward to a glorious eternity.**

But we must also remember that it is good news for the rest of the world as well because sin and wickedness are being judged. The blessings of Christendom have impacted not only Christians but the whole world! Even those who loudly reject God and His Gospel are often the ones who want justice, and that is just what Jesus came to bring! This is why Jesus could proclaim to Nicodemus, “as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

16 For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. 17 For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”

The incarnation of Jesus is Good News! Good News of Joy for us and all the world and this is why it is to be shared and shared in all of its fullness...

➤ We are to share the story of Christmas and the story of Christmas is the work of Jesus!

It is a mystery that God had kept hidden until the fullness of time and now it is a mystery that has been revealed and is to be shared.’

Listen again to how the Apostle Paul speaks about this to the Saints at Ephesus: Ephesians 3: “1 For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles-- 2 if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, 3 how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, 4 by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), 5 which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: 6 that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel, 7 of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power. 8 To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, 9 and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; 10 to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, 11 according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12 in whom we have boldness & access with confidence through faith in Him.”

Or as that same Apostle preached so powerfully on Mars Hill in Athens, “29 Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. 30 Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, 31 because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.” Of course that Man is the Lord Jesus, the Babe in the manger! In a moment we will sing a hymn of response that reminds us about the mystery of what that little child would do and impact it would have on all the world. That Little Babe so few days old that came to rifle Satan's fold.

Communion Meditation: Luke 1:46

“And Mary said: "My soul magnifies the Lord, And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed. 49 For He who is mighty has done great things for me, And holy is His name. 50 And His mercy is on those who fear Him From generation to generation. 51 He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. 52 He has put down the mighty from their thrones, And exalted the lowly. 53 He has filled the hungry with good things, And the rich He has sent away empty. 54 He has helped His servant Israel, In remembrance of His mercy, 55 As He spoke to our fathers, To Abraham and to his seed forever.””