

## “Meeting God in the Mystery.”

Several years ago, I saw this show on TV— and, in all fairness, you should probably know that it came to us from the same network that brought us such gems as *When Animals Attack*, *The World’s Scariest Police Chases!*, and *When Stunts Go Bad*— anyway, the show I’m talking about was called *Breaking the Magician’s Code: Magic’s Biggest Secrets Finally Revealed*. And, as its name suggests, it’s purpose was to reveal the secrets behind all of the really famous tricks and illusions.

As I recall, the show seemed to be fairly successful, there were several different episodes of that show that got aired. I suspect its popularity was based on the fact that people like to solve mysteries.

Well, this morning we were presented with a couple of mysteries in our gospel reading. And it may not surprise you to learn that people have been trying to “expose” the truth behind them for a very long time.

For example, how did Jesus really feed five thousand people with only five loaves of bread and two fish? One solution was to suggest that he didn’t; that, when the disciples began sharing what little was available to them, then other people in that crowd— people who had “packed a lunch”— also began to share what they had available.

Therefore, the real miracle wasn’t that somehow a little bit of food miraculously increased to feed a lot of people, but rather that a lot of people could be moved to share out of what was for them one of their most precious commodities, food; and share it with strangers. That’s apparently the *real* miracle; but that’s just a theory.

Also in our gospel reading, we are told that Jesus walked on water. How did he do that? One theory— and there is some linguistic evidence to support it— is that Jesus didn’t walk *on* the water but *along* the water; which is to say, on the beach. In other words, what we have here isn’t a miracle but simply an example of poor translation. But that’s just *another* theory.

However, toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Mark Twain was touring the Holy Land, his group was offered a boat ride across the Sea of Galilee. When they asked the boatman how much the trip would cost, they were told that his fee was \$50; a huge sum in those days. At that point, Twain was heard to say: “I now see why Jesus walked across this lake.”

Anyway, those two theories I mentioned earlier, might satisfy some people, but they don't address two problems.

First, the stories were *recorded* as miracles; and that means the authors *intended* to portray these events as miracles.

And, second, the church has preserved these stories, for nearly *two thousand years*, as miracles. So, perhaps the question we need to be asking isn't “What really happened?” but rather, “Why did the gospel writers insist on including so many examples of miraculous events?” It's a good question; why indeed include stories that might prove problematic to future generations?

I think most scholars would agree that one reason was to establish the credentials of Jesus: to assure future readers, who never had the opportunity to see or hear Jesus for themselves, that he was who he said he was; in other words, to get people to sit up and pay attention to the things he was saying and doing. And those are good reasons, but I think the better reason may be this: Because the gospel writers wanted to make sure that there was always some element of mystery in our spiritual journey.

And so, when we read the gospel accounts of Jesus, we can certainly see someone who was every bit as human as the rest of us; but, at the same time, he was also much, much more. And even though our relationship with God has many of the same qualities as we experience in our relationships with family and friends, it, too, is so much more. Which is to say, that, while there is always some element of the mundane in our spiritual journey, there also needs to be the more important element of the mysterious and miraculous.

And so, I tend to believe that the purpose of these miraculous stories was not to provide us with a puzzle to solve, but to remind us that *mystery is part of our life and our faith*; to remind us that it's always been that way; and to encourage us to embrace the mystery. In other words, life is not all black and white; there's a lot of gray areas that may never get resolved into any one particular hue or shade. And the challenge presented to us, is to figure out how

we are going to create lives that are fulfilling and satisfying— both physically and spiritually— in the midst of so many unanswerable questions.

One evening— and it was a time when our girls were still very young— Peggy and I were walking through our neighborhood when we began to talk about where or when each of us felt the closest to God. Peggy said that it was when she was having a particularly good time with Laura or Emily, and they were connecting at some level that was more than simply physical or emotional, and she wasn't trying to analyze it but simply enjoying it. I described an evening at summer camp, when I was alone and staring into the dark, star-filled sky, feeling awe at such an immense, mysterious universe; at that moment, I felt very much in communion with God. Now, neither of us could explain why we felt closest to God in that particular moment, but that was alright.

I'm sure a lot of people could describe the times *when*, or the places *where*, they feel closest to God; and, like Peggy and me, don't know why that should be the case. But I think it's the case that many people reach a place in their spiritual journey where they are content to let mysteries remain just that, mysteries.

When I was a teenager, my priest offered a sermon based upon the Old Testament story of Noah and the flood. And he presented the story to us as a myth or parable whose purpose was to convey some truth greater than the elements of the actual story. A few days later, I made an appointment to talk with him, because in the news there was a story of how archaeologists had found what they believed to be the ancient remains of a large boat on top of Mt. Ararat. I asked him how this news might affect his approach to biblical interpretation. His response was quite simple: If they actually discovered Noah's ark, that would be great because it would serve to strengthen the basic truthfulness of the biblical texts. But if they never found the ark, that would be fine as well because, in the end, our faith should not stand upon a Bible that conveys only facts, but rather upon a Bible that conveys eternal truths.

I have observed this much in my life: My encounters with God— those times when God seemed the most real to me— have almost never taken place amid the facts of life, but rather amid the mysteries and miracles of life. The miracle of birth, and the mystery of death. The miracle of love offered, and the mystery of love enduring. These are the times and places where I have encountered the living God, and they are experiences that defy explanation.

When I was in college, I traveled to Las Vegas to attend a convention for homebuilders and designers. Obviously, when the day's events were over, I spent the evenings exploring. One evening, while wandering through a place called Circus Circus I stopped to watch a magician. He performed in the round, and while he was pretty good, it was his grand finale that completely amazed me; first, there was a Tiger in a cage, and then it was his assistant who was in the cage, and then it was the Tiger again. It was a very good illusion. I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how he did it, but in the end was content to allow it to remain a mystery.

There will always be mysteries in this world, and there will always be people who try to solve those mysteries. And I thank God for them both, because they serve to make life more interesting.

In the end, our faith will be based less upon facts and more upon truths. It will be a faith that does not rely upon microscopes but, rather, sits back and enjoys the grand vistas. It will be a faith of forests, and not trees. It will be a faith that persists in hope, despite the rational explanations we heard this morning, because we hope in One who cannot be seen. In the end, our faith will be a faith of mysteries, because it's in those mysteries that we most often encounter God.

Amen.