

Sermon
Rev. Sonja L. Ingebritsen
March 3, 2019
Luke 9:28-45 – Transfiguration

Real Life Mystery

May the words spoken, and the words received, be only in your service, great God of Love. Amen.

I want to share three real life mysteries with you today. Two are my own.

My grandfather was an outdoorsman. In fact, he let us know that he wanted the plaque on his grave to read: “Loves nature.” When he was in his early 90’s and not able to hunt and fish and hike anymore, he would bring the fallen apples from his apple tree up to the cemetery for the deer. He lived in a small town in the beautiful mountains of North Idaho. The cemetery was up a ways from town, surrounded by forest.

I had the great privilege to be with Gramps when he took his last breath at my parents’ home. To journey with someone as they pass from this world to the next could certainly count as mystery itself, but I want to point to what happened afterwards. After hospice had been called, we bathed his body as an anointing, and the undertakers came for him, my parents, my partner and I met my brother and sister-in-law for dinner. It was an opportunity to recount the experience of his death and celebrate his life.

On the way back to my parent’s house, which was situated in the wooded area around a lake, I turned a corner and saw a deer standing near the road. It didn’t startle and leap into the woods for safety when it saw my car. It just stood there, watching us. A second deer came out of the woods. It, too, stood watching us. Unafraid. Calm. I slowed the car to a stop. We watched them watching us.

In that experience, I sensed the presence of my grandfather in the first deer and my grandmother in the second. I sensed that they had waited for us, that their appearance in the darkness that evening was intentional, and that my grandparents were together and at peace. For me, it was a mysterious event, one that I can’t explain and have no need to defend. If a wildlife biologist had been in the car, they might have a logical reason for the deer’s behavior. But I have no need of that. My encounter with that mystery gave me comfort—in that moment and in the moments to come. Sometimes, mystery is in the eyes of the beholder. Always, mystery is interpreted by the one who encounters it.

A second personal experience with mystery happened several years later. One April morning, in 2005, I woke up with these words on my brain: “I think I need to go to the Academy for Spiritual Formation.” Now, I’m not the intuitive type. I don’t often have clear messages come to me. But that morning, I not only heard the words, but heard the truth of the words, even though I couldn’t understand why.

The Academy for Spiritual Formation, as I’ve mentioned before, is a two-year low-residency program sponsored by the United Methodist Church. I’d heard of it because one of the program leaders was a deacon at my former UMC congregation. It sounded kind of cool, but I’d never given it serious thought.

So why now? I asked myself. Why would my spirit have been drawn to something run by Methodists, when I had recently been deeply wounded by that denomination and was still feeling disconnected from church in the largest sense even though I was then attending a UCC church.

But I followed my intuition, and I don't have any doubt that I was guided by the Holy Spirit. Not only did the experience of the Academy provide healing from the church's betrayal, but it quickly guided me on the path to seminary. That mysterious, clear subconscious nudge is what ultimately led me to be your pastor.

The third mystery I want to talk about this morning is the mystery we encounter in the story of the Transfiguration that we heard in scripture this morning.

The lectionary text has us coming into the story after it's already started. We began with "Eight days after Jesus said these things." What things? What immediately precedes this story is a conversation Jesus has with Peter. Peter tells Jesus that some people think Jesus is Moses come back to life, or maybe the prophet Elijah. Jesus asks him, "But who do *you* say that I am." Peter makes a faith confession, "You are the Messiah," he says. Following that, Jesus has a conversation with the disciples in which he again predicts his crucifixion and death. And he tells them that they, too, will be targets of the Empire if they follow him.

So, "about eight days later," Jesus goes up on the mountain to pray. He brings with him Peter, James and John. There, on that mountain, the disciples have their own encounter with mystery. They suddenly see that Jesus is not alone. Moses and Elijah are standing next to him, and they are surrounded by light. So, Jesus is neither of the prophets of the faith that people contend him to be. Yet, he is in this pantheon with them, truly a prophet, truly the Messiah Peter thought, or maybe just hoped, him to be.

The disciples are gob smacked. They are speechless except to say that they will build altars there, to honor the three and mark the place as holy. But before Peter could finish telling them his plans for the shrines, a cloud overtakes them. They hear a voice from out of the cloud declaring, "This is my Son, my chosen one. Listen to him!" And as the voice was speaking, Moses and Elijah disappeared. They saw only Jesus.

We're not told how the disciples understood the mystery they had just encountered, or what Jesus said about it. All the story tells us is that the next day, Jesus and the disciples descend from the mountain top, and Jesus is immediately surrounded by a crowd. A man pleads with Jesus to heal his son. He says that he'd asked the other disciples, but they were unable to help.

Jesus is angry; fed up really. He'd given his disciples the authority to heal in his name, but they still didn't seem to understand the power they'd been given or the purpose for it. So Jesus heals.

What follows next in the Gospel of Luke is an argument among the disciples about who among them is greatest. Jesus surprises them, as Jesus does, by bringing a child to his side, saying, "whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me, for the least among you is the greatest." (Luke 9:47-48)

Even Peter, James, and John were in on the argument. They, who had come face-to-face with the transfiguration of Jesus, in the company of Elijah and Moses, hearing the proclamation about the identity of Jesus were in on the argument, had left the experience without having been transfigured themselves. They'd left the mystery on the mountain top and came home as the same old, same old.

You see, sometimes divine mystery is encountered but either misunderstood or dismissed.

What do we do in the presence of divine mystery? Are we on the lookout for it? When we experience it do we try to shave it down to something we can weigh and measure and rationalize, or can we give thanks for a presence of God that we don't need to explain away. Can we move past the what and how to seek the why and what for of the encounter, listening for God to speak

to us through it?

We have a chance to practice that in worship as a whole, but particularly through the sacrament of the Holy Supper, communion. While we don't profess that the bread and wine are the literal body and blood of Jesus, we do acknowledge that the elements of bread and wine represent an actual encounter with the living, risen Christ. We believe that through this meal, shared in community, we are enlivened by a covenant of renewal as the Body of Christ.

I can't prove that to you in a scientific equation. We trust this as an act of faith, relying on God's grace to be present as Jesus promised. Can we allow the divine mystery to be what it is, and merely make ourselves present to encounter it? Are we open to being transformed by it, converted again by the all-inclusive love of God?

As we are invited to the feast of Jesus, come. Come, experience the Mystery. Come and be transfigured anew. Amen.