

Apocalypse of Mystery
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian Church, NC – December 20, 2020

Please read:
Romans 16:25-27
Luke 1:26-38

Let's face it, most of us aren't much into mystery. We're more scholarly, technical, finance-savvy types here in New Canaan. We know how to hustle and put the *A-Plus* into A-Type personality. You don't get to be in the top income per capita for nothing! Most of the time, we're trying to take the mystery *out* of life, not put it in. We want to solve problems like the COVID-19 pandemic, get the numbers of infection down, get the numbers of vaccines up, solve the problems of a fluctuating economy, manage the risk of a volatile political climate and financial market, or whatever. We're so tired of the endless masked and socially distanced reality and want to move on. In this last week before Christmas, we're less open to the naïve childlike wonder and fascination of mystery. We're the cynical adults in the room. As Joan Didion once put it, we are at best "slouching toward Bethlehem" this Christmas.

But then I come across something I've never seen before... In the Romans text, the conclusion to his theological *magnum opus* for the church, Paul writes about the "revelation of the mystery." As a Greek Geek and lover of etymology, I try and better understand what's behind the English translation. This week, I was amazed to discover what Paul actually writes. The "revelation of the mystery" can be translated literally, "Apocalypse of Mystery."

What Paul is talking about is the mind-altering *Good News of Jesus Christ*, the revelation of God made flesh. But this language is interesting. Apocalypse simply means "revelation," but I think even apocalypse in English gets more of the impact of the Mystery that is revealed in Jesus Christ.

It is a mystery for us to hear about this Mary-and-the-angel thing from the start. Most of us, to tell the truth, aren't even interested anymore. We've heard it so often, over so many Christmases, that it's only a story for children.

Even many of the scholarly commentaries I occasionally consult denigrate such annunciation texts as *mythological*. We naturally deflate the story. We reduce it to something we can handle, something we can halfway understand with our skeptical, pseudo-scientific secular minds. We have to do this because we are not prepared, in this bottom-line, empirical, and no-nonsense world, to receive such news with the wonder and mystery with which it was originally told. This isn't My Father's world, this is the *Financial Times-Wall Street Journal*-world, and we surely haven't heard any angels sweetly singing... at least we wouldn't dare talk about it on a Zoom meeting, or with our friends at school, or even most of our friends from church. Mystery makes a muddle of most people's minds. We're conditioned to avoid, eradicate or ignore it, and would hardly willfully receive or celebrate it....

So, what do you make of Paul's declaration that the good news of Jesus is an "apocalypse of mystery"? Maybe we need to rethink mystery, at least *this* Mystery of the ages that has been disclosed in Bethlehem.

We speak of the Gospel here today on this fourth Sunday of Advent, the good news of Jesus Christ coming to save us all. But we cannot really hear the gospel until we hear again the mystery, until we can hear more than the bare story, until the story opens up wells of joy and excitement in our hearts and minds as we are surprised again by God's grace.

I know you've heard Pulitzer-prize winning writer Annie Dillard's suggestion that we all should be wearing our crash helmets for worship, and the ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares because God might actually show up here in our worship scene...¹ But which of us really understands Annie Dillard? She's a poet. And poets are nuts anyway, right? They don't fit into our world any more than the Christmas story does. Angels appearing, immaculate conceptions, stars guiding scholars, and a Savior named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace... showing up in a manger? It all sounds more like "poetry" than "reality"...

The word angel means in the Greek, simply, *messenger*. The angels of Scripture are *messengers of God*. That's why artists portray them as humans with wings. Angels are not gods; they are messengers *from* God.

Mary heard from a messenger of the Lord, and she was afraid! And can you blame her? What would your reaction be if you were an unmarried teenager, poor, living in a forgotten, depressed, and oppressed part of the world, and greeted one day by a man dressed in white and told that you were going to have a baby? The man was not a gynecologist. He was Gabriel, the angel. Luke says Mary was "much perplexed," which is a polite, Bible way of saying that the poor woman was half scared out of her wits. That's usually the way it is in the bible when angels show up. They are usually a sign that something strange, something mysterious, something terrifying and new is about to happen. God is stepping into the course of history, preparing to change lives. And guess who is going to help God, says the angel?

As I read this account and hear again Mary's response, I began to hear my own voice in the words "how can this be..."? However, the message comes, the word of God is usually disturbing, disorienting, disruptive, mysterious. At best, it sounds too good to be true. Indeed, could truth be stranger than fiction? What do you think?

As we stand on the threshold of another Christmas in a world where we allow little room for mystery, let alone angels, I want you to notice just two things about Mary's encounter with the angel Gabriel.

First, note that though Gabriel called Mary "favored one," she didn't feel favored, at least not at first. Perhaps because Mary knew enough about the real, living God of Israel, she knew that a message from God might be something about which she might be fearful. It would mean a change in her life plans, a change in her relationships; it would mean great blessing and honor, but also great challenge, pain, and grief. This was not a guardian angel come to tell Mary she was going to be safe while crossing the street; Gabriel came to tell her that she had been chosen by God *to change the world* through Christ.

Secondly, note how this story of Mary's encounter with the angel ends. After she ponders and questions the word of the Lord to her, Mary says, "*Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*"

In other words, Mary said, "I'm not sure what all of this means, but nevertheless here I am, ready to be of service in the work of God." Which was a wonderful, faithful thing for Mary to say - that's why the church regards her as the very first of all the disciples, the first person in the gospels to be called by God and to say yes to that call.

¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, pp. 40-41.

Angels usually appear in Scripture to bring someone a message from God. The message is usually one involving risky service rather than comfort. Our God comes to us, not wearing wings and a blank face upon which we can paint any expression that suits us. Our God comes to us bearing a name, *Jesus Christ*, wearing a face that is not only compassion, but also vocation. *"Follow me," he says to us.*

I want to say that I do believe in angels, the messengers of God. Not because life is tough and we all deserve a personal winged guardian to help us cope, but because I have seen God's servants over the years, and even some of you, offering yourselves in service to the living God. You received a message from God through a messenger named Gabriel, or Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, or Bob, or Augie, or Victoria, or Cindy, or Alexandra, or Jim, or Randy, or Serena, or Linda, or Steve, or Dede, or Jen, or John, or someone saying, *"God wants to use you to bless the world."* *"Won't you share your gifts..."* as a witness for Christ in the corporate world, in City Hall, or at school or New Covenant House, or at home, quietly praying, or faithfully bearing life's many hardships? I believe in God's angels because I've seen so many hear God's calling and living a Yes, sharing God's Word.

Sometimes, though, we are afraid of the mystery. Sometimes, we do not receive grace. We do not always see the glory of the Lord in our world full of pandemics, political corruption and cynicism, a world full of hackers, terrorists and wars and rumor of wars. We do not always recognize messengers of God, nor hear God's word to us. We cannot always see how God is calling to us or working in and through us. We don't always worship the Holy God, ... Sometimes our hearts are filled with inconsequential things.

Is that the way it is with you this last week coming up before Christmas? In our isolation and separation, is it feeling like it could be just another year of tinsel and tinny carols? If it is, don't you think it's time you made room in your heart again for a new *apocalypse of mystery*? The poetry of Christmas? The mystery of God's amazing grace and unconditional love? I like the advice Bishop John Shelby Spong gives: "My suggestion is that you separate mystery from history and then enter into and enjoy the mystery of the season. Dream of Peace on Earth and good will among men and women, and then dedicate yourself to bringing that vision into being!"

In these last days of Advent, take a moment to consider the people around you – on those office or family Zoom calls, or at Zumbach's, along Elm Street, or even around the Christmas dinner table. Remember that God, the Lord of the universe has mysteriously changed the world through people just like them. In fact, God has mysteriously changed the world through people just like *you*. And the joyful message of the Lord to you is this: "Greetings favored one, the Lord is with you!" "Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with the Lord!" "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." "Nothing will be impossible with God!"

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.