

Christmas Eve 2007
Sermon preached by Laura Merrill
Wimberley UMC

Tonight is the night, the night we celebrate the light coming into the darkness, heaven coming to earth, the unknown becoming known. This is the night of the Incarnation, the revelation of God's own self to the world.

God has in fact given us different ways of knowing God, different forms of divine revelation: the created world, with all its intricacy, its patterns and order and diversity; the scriptures, also diverse, full of contradictions and humanness, telling the story of a people's experience with God; and finally Jesus, a human bound by space and time, with a particular genetic code, with hair and eyes and fingernails all a specific way. These are all concrete, tangible, accessible to us. These are means by which we feel we can know God.

We celebrate these means of revelation, yet when you look at it, even these means are finally at their core mysterious to us. For example, we perceive God's creation at close range, and we have learned amazing truths about the workings of our bodies and of nature itself. Yet there is much we do not know—we still do not completely know the boundaries of the world, neither at the farthest reaches of the universe, not at the most minute levels of matter and energy. Our best scientific minds are constantly at work on these, but we don't even understand our own minds and there's such a big chunk of them we don't seem to use at all.

The scriptures are another mystery. We obviously have the original words, written in Hebrew and Greek, and we can hold them in our hands, but in some cases,

especially in ancient Hebrew, we're not quite sure what certain words mean. In other cases an account is so very old, we know the words but still don't know what it's talking about. We try through historians and archeologists to know the context in which the books were written, but that's not an exact science either. Even if 10 different scholars could go back in time to the same place and moment, each would give a different first-hand description of what was going on and why. By the same token, 10 different people reading the same scripture text will find different themes or meanings, based on their needs and their perspective. Scripture is our central form of divine revelation as Christians, and we claim and cling to it. But it is also full of mystery, filtered through the lives of human beings, both as written and as read.

And that leads us to the mystery of the Incarnation. In some ways we can know who Jesus of Nazareth was, but even just with regular old people there is always an enormous part of the soul that is unknown to others and sometimes even to the self. You can be married for 40 years yet still be surprised by your mate. You can raise children and know who they are in the world, with a very intimate knowledge. But you can never really own them or peg them completely. And how much more would this be true of the man Jesus, who somehow embodies not only the flesh and bone of his mother Mary, not only the teachings and context of his father Joseph, but also the infinite nature of the one God, Creator of all things?

So clearly God wants a connection with us, but due to the great disparity between us and God, a lot gets lost in translation. Even the most immediate and concrete forms of divine revelation remain in part mysterious to us. So then, what is it

that we can finally, really know about God?

Well, fortunately, just as there are different means of revelation, there are also different ways of knowing. And we can know without being able to explain it. We may not be able to explain the key to life or the inner workings of the universe, the galaxies ever spinning and expanding, and atoms nothing more than vibrating energy. But we can see order in the creation, and we can perceive and know the beauty and wonder of which we are a part, and we can imagine all of it reflecting God's image. We may not understand exactly how a historically embedded piece of writing can speak with a living voice today, but we can know that their story tells of a God who gives life and promises hope, a God who is faithful and the final resting place for our hearts. We may not be able to explain how God becomes a person, but we can know that we have met God in people, that we have looked into the face of love, love that far surpasses what any human could muster up alone.

We may not have an explanation tonight for how bread and cup can be Jesus for us. But we can know that this simple meal feeds more than our bodies, that it feeds the empty spots in us. We can know there is always room at the table. We can know that brokenness is never an obstacle for God, but instead exactly where God chooses to meet us—in broken body and sacrifice. We can know that, wherever we've come from, the table of Jesus in our home.

Give thanks tonight for what is revealed to us, for a God who already knew everything about us, yet wanted us to know ourselves and know God. Give thanks too for the mysteries, for the depth that is always there, inviting us in, cradling us and

giving us peace, even when we do not understand.

I'd like to close with a prayer by George MacLeod, founder of the Iona

Community in Scotland:

Christ above us, Christ beneath us,
Christ beside us, Christ within us.

Invisible, we see you, Christ above us.
With earthly eyes we see above us
clouds or sunshine, grey or bright.
But with the eye of faith
we know you reign,
instinct in the sun ray,
speaking in the storm,
warming and moving all creation.
Invisible, we see you, Christ above us.

Invisible, we see you, Christ beneath us.
With earthly eyes we see beneath us
stones and dust and dross.
But with the eyes of faith,
we know you uphold us.
In you all things consist and hang together.
The very atom is light energy,
the grass is vibrant,
the rock pulsate.
All is in flux;
turn but a stone and an angel moves.
Underneath are the everlasting arms.
Unknowable, we know you, Christ beneath us.

Inapprehensible, we know you, Christ beside us.
With earthly eyes we see men and women,
exuberant or dull, tall or small.
But with the eye of faith,
we know you dwell in each.
You are imprisoned in the dope fiend and the drunk,
dark in the dungeon, but you are there.
You are released, resplendent,
in the loving mother, the passionate bride,
and in every sacrificial soul.
Inapprehensible, we know you, Christ beside us.

Intangible, we touch you, Christ within us.
With earthly eyes we see ourselves,
dust of the dust, earth of the earth.
But with the eye of faith,
we know ourselves all girt about with eternal stuff,
our minds capable of Divinity,
our bodies groaning, waiting for the revealing,
our souls redeemed, renewed.
Intangible, we touch you, Christ within us.

Christ above us, beneath us, beside us, within us.
What need have we for temples made with hands?

(George MacLeod, quoted by Eric in OH on dps.com, December 21, 2007)

This may be our best Christmas in more than 45 years, and we believe it is the first one that we won't be together in that time. I'll be in prison, she'll be on the front lines of a tragic disaster finding housing for people who have lived their entire lives one paycheck away from living in the streets.

A Christmas Story. This is for the Sunday School class. As you know, I am saving this poor cold dreary little world one sad story at a time; but was moved to tears when a young pair (roommates) had their rented mobile home quite simply washed out from beneath them. Between them, they had the price of a cheap motel for one night. They're young, so they don't know about calling First Responders. They spent the following day on a city bus, wondering if they could find enough fare to ride all night, looking so much like they had nearly drowned, that various other riders asked.

A female passenger listened and volunteered that she allowed as how she could step up for one more night for them at the motel. When they went to the motel they discovered she had prepaid for them for an entire week. They never did know her name.

Wish there were a happy ending because my little couple expire at midnight tonight and the weather is pretty inhospitable. FEMA has not been able to do much so far because they both registered for the same property and they are currently tied up in duplicate status. They didn't plug me in until about noon, and are of course, oblivious to the channels through which anything Federal must go. So, my boss said go ahead, you're not hurting my feelings, and I told my little story to the Ladies of the ARC (Red Cross) and they were so charmed, our kids don't have to freeze until after Christmas.

On the 20th, when it became obvious that a single month's rental assistance was not going to go very far on the newly inflated rents and nonexistent rental resources. FEMA and State of Washington elected to provide a second month. These people are so dispirited. They just talk it out and then I tell them there's more coming and it's like so much more than it really is. Now, I've just learned they've enacted a 15day moratorium on expulsions.

There is no allusion, of course, to a religious holiday from the government. But sometimes my "children" seem to need some perspective. And a couple of times when I seem to have established a little more rapport than I or the government intended, I have told them to savor it, that this the Christmas they will never forget, that they may never again be quite so close in quite the same way.

Remember, What Goes Around Comes Around. This is actually an incredible time to be working.

Love to All.
Shirley

In the evocative phrase of 17th century poet John Donne, that not only was "immensity cloistered" in Mary's womb on that holy night. (AF on dps.com, 12/19/07)