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Knowing the Unknown God

Text: St. John 3:1-17

One of the great and pervading themes of the Gospel of John is the contrast John draws between light and darkness, a theme that is reflected in John's further contrast between those who are enlightened and those who are benighted. This contrast plays itself out in a very specific way. Christ, the Word of God, John tells us, is the light of all people, and this light has come and dwelt among us. Yet, when he dwelt among us, not everybody turned toward him and came to the light; instead, many, most notably the religious leaders of God's own people, turned away because they couldn't bear the idea that what they were might be brought to the light.

One of the great illustrations of the tensions of this spiritual dynamic of turning toward and running from the light is the story of Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus. Nicodemus is a teacher in Israel, yet John tells us, he comes to Jesus out of the night, which is to say he comes to Jesus not with understanding and knowledge, but as ignorant. His ignorance is played out and demonstrated almost comically in his ensuing dialogue with Jesus, for virtually every answer that Jesus gives to Nicodemus' questions, Nicodemus takes in exactly the wrong way, and misunderstands. For example, Jesus tells Nicodemus that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. Unfortunately, the word that Jesus uses for "above" can also mean "again." Nicodemus on a fifty/fifty choice gets it wrong, and so worries how anybody who is old might be born all over again. How can one re-enter a mother's womb? He really is puzzled. So Jesus tries to straighten him out by telling him that there are two very different things: Spirit and flesh. What is born of the Spirit is spiritual. This includes the way that one

thinks about things; there is a spiritual way of understanding life. On the other hand, there is that which is born of the flesh. This includes those who are overly literal and material in their understanding. This distinction utterly confuses Nicodemus who seems to think there is only one way to approach things, thus proving Jesus' point. Finally, the confused Nicodemus throws up his hands and asks: "How can these things be?" Jesus before pitching in one more time to try to explain, sighs and asks: "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" Things have indeed come to a sorry pass in Israel if Nicodemus is the best they can come up with.

This is a classic story, but what strikes me about it is how it may well be a parable for the relations of religion and science for the last three or four hundred years; certainly for the last one hundred fifty. Or, much more precisely, I think it is a parable for the relations of the gospel and the modern mind, scientific *and* religious. Certainly at any number of points in modernity, science has misunderstood religion. One thinks here of recent popular writers such as Christopher Hitchens or Richard Dawkins, who think they are standing on science and who, by doing so, have delivered a deadly intellectual blow to religion. However, their ignorance about what they are talking about and their willingness to talk loudly about it anyhow amounts to little more than buffoonery. As one recent critic of their efforts has put it, their critiques of religion so miss the point of religion in the first place that those critiques make the same sort of foolish mistake as one would make by trying to explain ballet as a botched attempt to catch a bus. They just don't get the nature of what they are talking about, just as Nicodemus didn't get the difference between spiritual birth and physical birth. But insofar as religious leaders have often tried to respond to these critiques on the same level on which they have been launched, they, too, haven't understood the gospel, even though they are supposed to be preaching it. Too many of

their responses are the same sort of thing as it would be if Jesus tried to explain to Nicodemus that, yes, one could re-enter the womb, and then gave him a theory to say how. Anyone who does that isn't any more enlightened than the critics of religion.

Where is the problem with the modern mind? What makes it so material and literal? It is, in a nutshell, its inability to think about mystery. That was Nicodemus' problem, as his mind clearly was overly literal. He couldn't imagine what Jesus was trying to tell him. But such is also the problem of much of the present day critiques of Christianity, which assume that there are only facts, worldly facts, and even seem to assume that God is one of those worldly facts, a being just like any other, as concrete and as irrelevant as chalk or cheese. That is also the problem of religious thinkers such as creationists, who think that they ought to or even can prove the things of God. But it is also just as much a problem in religious liberalism. There are those who think that, based on the evidence, that the most they can float is a God who is not and cannot be anything more than a progressive social agenda. God here means no more to us than the mere uplifting of our own spirits and divine encouragement for our own good works.

The problem here in all these cases is, as one philosopher suggested, that in the modern world we think that there is a perfectly clear answer to *everything*, and that everything that we don't know can be cleared up by a few additional new facts, or by a stricter, more rigorous analysis of the questions we pose. We think that in time technique and investigation will put everything firmly in our grasp. The problem here isn't that clarity is bad; the problem is assuming that everything is alike, and that everything responds to the intellectual techniques of modern science and technology. The problem is in assuming that we can have clear control over everything and that everything lies in our grasp, and that our minds can penetrate all, at least, they can given enough time.

Well, the problem is that not everything is alike, and not everything should get the same sort of answer. Not everything yields to technique and not everything is graspable. Sometimes things grasp us. Sometimes we encounter mysteries, and they don't get answers. Instead, what mysteries ought to get from us is a sense of awe, and a sense of wonder. What they ought to get from us is silence, and listening. And they ought to get from us is a sense of giving ourselves over to their light. And if they don't get that, it is simply a sign that we didn't get it at all.

But what are the mysteries that are like this? Consider these things:

If science tells us how the world is, and it really does do a more than respectable job of that, still it can't tell us why there is something rather than nothing at all. That simple question, "why is there something rather than nothing?" is a philosophical mystery that has set great thinkers on the journey of a lifetime, for as Plato once said, philosophy begins in a sense of wonder. In Plato's sense, therefore, thinking begins with a mystery; mystery begets thinking, and does not defeat it.

If there is a philosophical mystery that we encounter when we ask why there is something rather than nothing, we encounter a parallel theological mystery when we ask why a perfectly good God would create. After all, as Simone Weil once suggested, it would seem that, if God is perfect, then creating a world couldn't add anything to God and make God better. Creating would, therefore, seem to take something away from God. Yet, in order to share himself, God created a world, and God loved it, even if it wasn't perfect – and that is God's perfection. That is a mystery; the proper response to it is not technique and analysis, but love and wonder.

Technology and science cannot say anything, either, about the mysterious silent beauty of the created world, for it is beauty even more than the unknown origins of the world that commands our awe and speaks of God's own goodness. As the psalmist says, "the heavens are

telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork." Job, even in the midst of his suffering, once he is given a vision of the creation as a whole, falls down in admiration, and says he didn't know what he was talking about when he complained, even though he had every reason to complain of the evil he had suffered. That is a matter for wonder, for it tells us that the mysterious beauty of the world can heal even our deepest suffering. It tells us that the world is spiritually charged. As the poet Gerald Manley Hopkins wrote, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God."

There is a mystery, too, in the way that physical force and violence can dominate the human world and crush the human heart, but there is an even greater mystery in the grace that permeates the world and that lets us forgive one another, and that brings an end to dominating force, and that allows new beginnings. There is a mystery in the existence of evil in a good world, and an even greater mystery of a love stronger than death in a world in which there is evil.

And there is a mystery in an unknown God, who is so beyond us that he is unknowable to us, but who yet gives himself to be known. This mystery of revelation first appears in the beauty of the world; it appears again when the light that enlightens all people becomes flesh and dwells among us. It appears yet again when God sends God's own Spirit to lead us in all truth so that in God's light we might see light. And there is also the mystery of God's self revelation when unmoveable ignorance is chased away by light. Think about Nicodemus. Impossibly thick as he seems to be in chapter three of John, at the end of the Gospel he is the only one of the Pharisees at Jesus' trial to ask for real justice, and he is the only one who, at the end, helped take care of Jesus' body after the crucifixion. And this mystery of God revealing himself finally appears in the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist where, by God's gift, we can know intimately the

infinite God of heaven and earth.

All of these things are mysteries, and they resist the clumsy prying and violent technique of modern analysis and problem solving. These mysteries give our world texture, and depth, and our lives a horizon of hope beyond hope, and a sense of indefeasible goodness. They give a sense of grace and light. Without these mysteries our lives would be truncated and hollow – as truncated and hollow as many social prophets say they have become in the modern world where plentitude lacks gratitude, and quantity never means quality. A world without mystery, or, one where mystery is not acknowledged, is a world where technique and mastery and mere numbers dominate, and where contemplation and wonder retreat. It is a flat world; there is little texture and there is no concern for wild, useless beauty, or for beauty having anything to do with truth. It is a world, as one philosopher put it, where there is "the flatness of modern civilization which sees 'the final triumph of the Hollow Men, who, knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing, have lost the ability to *feel* or *think* deeply about anything." It is a world of ambitious lives, but where ambition is never for transcending greatness and goodness.

It is important for us to know about these mysteries, especially if we want depth in our lives. Knowing that there are mysteries is important, too, in the way that we represent and think about the Christian faith to ourselves and others, for the Christian faith is not an alternative scientific explanation. It is a way of life, a deep way of life, that consists in doing the only thing one can do in front of mysteries bigger than us, namely, giving oneself wholly.

It is important for us to know about these mysteries and how we are to act with them on this Sunday on which we celebrate the Trinity. For on this day, we do not celebrate an incomprehensible doctrine. What we do is celebrate the unknowable God's self revelation. We celebrate that from beginning to end, God, the unknowable God, has sought to make himself

known in the creation, and in the promises he has made to his people and in his faithfulness to them. And we celebrate that God has sought to be known by the light of all people becoming flesh, as well as in the sending of the Spirit that leads us into all truth, and in the future kingdom where we shall know even as we are known. These are the mysteries that surround us. These are the mysteries that redeem us; these are the mysteries that are given to us in this meal, whereby we become God's own. Come let us celebrate them, by tasting and see that the Lord is good, indeed.