

Isaiah 60: 1-6  
Ephesians 3: 1-6  
John 1: 1-18

Radiance and Mystery  
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The Christmas season brings out a rash of articles in popular magazines about Mary and Jesus: a sort of cursory attempt to get beneath or behind all the legends that have accrued over the centuries and to tell us what Mary was *really* like or what Jesus was *really* like. The cover of the December National Geographic gave us “How the Virgin Mary Became the World’s Most Powerful Woman,” and told us “Mary barely speaks in the New Testament, but her image and legacy are found and celebrated around the world.” Last year, Popular Mechanics gave us “The Real Face Of Jesus” and told us “Advances in forensic science reveal the most famous face in history.” This is human curiosity at work: it is hard for us to accept that no contemporary painted portraits or written descriptions exist for any biblical characters. Their actual appearance remains a mystery, no matter what Popular Mechanics might say.

The earliest church fathers, in the first few centuries of the Common Era, did not approve of making or worshipping pictures of Jesus, and those that were made vary quite a bit in appearance. Gradually the familiar image of a bearded Christ with long hair came to be standard, and northern European artists made him paler and paler and thinner and thinner and milder and milder, until we got the generic dirty blonde insipid Jesus of 20<sup>th</sup> century prints. (not that I have any opinion on those prints or anything ☺)

Lately though, various artists have challenged this Eurocentric picture, and one can now find a Japanese Christ, an African Christ, an Arab Christ, and perhaps the most controversial, the crucified “Christa” statue that causes such a stir in New York City in the 1980’s. To me, this represents a deep desire to be included in the Gospel story somehow, to be included in the promise and the radiance and the mystery we find there. We want to celebrate the incarnation, the en-fleshment, the embodiment of the divine among us, and sometimes this seems to require specificity: a concrete visual of the divine Word. And, especially in the last generation or so, new pictures are seen as a corrective to white privilege and male privilege.

Today is January 3<sup>rd</sup>, and technically, it is still Christmas...though it may seem that the world around us has already moved on. For a few days around Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, we got to experience the earthiness of the story: the journey to Bethlehem, the crowded town, the barn animals, the labor and birth, the manger, those rough shepherds. But now the Bible lessons move us on to very different kind of language: “In the beginning was the Word.” “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” No manger, no star, no donkeys (not that there is a donkey in any Bible birth story, but that’s another matter). I once heard a pithy observation: “The Gospel of John does not include an infancy narrative, it includes an infinity narrative.” It is hard to make paintings of infinity, or of the light of enlightenment, or of the foundational Word. The Gospel of John draws us into the mystical abstract, a hymn of wonder at the graciousness and power of God.

We might be tempted to draw a sharp line here: to see the Christmas Eve readings as part of a simple, kid-friendly, simple, nostalgic world, with a crèche and shepherds and angels and mangers, and then today's readings as part of a cerebral, grown-up world, where we analyze the Greek meanings of words to milk them for the most abstract concepts. And I know that many of you would rather be singing about the baby in the manger than thinking about the *logos* or Word of God.

But this is John's Christmas. It is not a story located in Bethlehem, with swaddling clothes and all. Instead, we are taken back to the beginning, to the birth of the cosmos. We hear echoes of Genesis. In the beginning, God spoke over chaos and said, "Let there be light." This is John's way of telling us that the God who breathed and brooded over the face of the deep darkness, who spoke the Word of light, who pronounced creation good - that God, that same God, took on flesh to come and spend some time with us. This is such a mystery, that it escapes our understanding. It makes no biological sense, no physical sense to say that "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." How do you paint a picture of that? And yet, we want to believe that God's mysterious grace and power cannot ignore our darkness, but can come closer than close to us. Even that desire to believe, planted deep within us, is a kind of radiant mystery.

How would you paint or depict or describe the mystery of divine presence in our world? The letter to Ephesians, read earlier, describes it this way: that "the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." The Gentiles - that means everybody, all races, all genders, all tribes, all of "us" and all of "them" - have the potential to become joined up in one body and so to express the radiance of Christ's enlightening presence in the world. The very unity that is so hard to achieve is a sign and a sacrament of the light that overcomes the darkness. That unity, or the promise of unity, is embedded in our stories and our hymns and our rituals, as we try again and again to live in the way of Emmanuel, God-with-us.

In our church, we do not have icons or visual representations of Jesus to help us to do this. Instead, we rely on a few rituals for the mystery. When one is baptized or confirmed or becoming a member here, certain "ritual" questions are asked to name our unity of purpose. I say, "Do you promise, by the grace of God, to be Christ's disciple, to follow in the way of our Savior, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, and to witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ as best as you are able?" And the parents or the confirmand or the new member says, "I do." Then I ask, "Do you promise, according to the grace given you, to grow in the Christian faith and be a faithful member of the church of Jesus Christ, celebrating Christ's presence and furthering his mission in the world?" And they reply, "I do." Then we sprinkle water, or lay a hand on the head, or shake hands. And they become sharers in the promise, members of the body, no matter their age or race or gender.

We have other rituals for the mystery. At the Solstice Service of Solace two weeks ago, we named the common experience of loss and hope. We sprinkled salt in water to symbolize our tears, we lit candles to shine in our darkness, and we said names in a holy space. And we became sharers in the promise, members of a broken and healing body.

Every month, we share another ritual for the mystery. At the Eucharist - Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper - we share a story, a taste of bread, a few drops of grape juice. We remember that baby in the manger, now pictured differently, as an adult male sitting at a meal with friends in a

dark room. We identify with the sorrow and the promise of that meal. We enact a ritual of participation, and become sharers in the promise, members of a broken and risen body.

Many people struggle with the mystery of Christmas, whether it is Luke story or Matthew's story or John's story. They struggle with the impossible notion of God taking human form. They struggle with the place of Christmas in modern society: its commercialization, its imposition of orthodoxy on a multi-cultural world. But perhaps our struggles should take us in another direction. If we let John's image of "the Word made flesh" or "the One close to the Father's heart" take root within us, some mystery might begin to unfold. If that Word were truly incarnated or en-fleshed or embodied in us, in our minds and hearts and hands and relationships, then what light might shine? As we cared for the homeless and the refugee, for the stranger and those in need, as we struggle for fairness and peace, what glory of grace and truth might become visible? We start with pictures or rituals, but we must move on to incarnation, to the rebirth of goodness in our world.

The Catholic author Richard Rohr wrote: "This Substantial Mystery is a mystery of participation and never of private ownership. The One Spirit is held communally. There is a deep symbiosis in the Body of Christ between the one who thinks he or she is giving and the one who thinks he or she is receiving. In the Infinite Spirit, the flow is in both directions or there is no flow at all."

I return to my original observations about "the real face of Jesus." Picturing Jesus as one race or another, tends to lead us to create Christ in our own image, to "own" Christ, so to speak. We can instead always picture Christ as "other," as the most holy of mysteries. Our reading from Ephesians called the "other" the Gentiles. John celebrates them as newly included in the body of Christ, newborn "children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God."

The real face of Jesus appears whenever we act with compassion and justice and the touch of healing. The real face of Jesus is a radiant mystery, a gift of God to be shared in this body and in the dark world. Amen.