

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

“Knowledge and Mystery”

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Ephesians 3:14-19

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We are on a quest to find truth and meaning in life. We are trying to make sense of the world and our place in it. We want to find solid ground to stand on and something we can believe in. But there's a problem. We haven't been taught how to think, how to know truth when we see it, what it means to make sense of things, or how to find that solid ground. Rather, we moderns are schooled in the logic that at its base is Descartes' *Cogito, ergo sum*. I think, therefore I am. Therefore I am? I Am? This phrase, I Am, originally used in scripture to mean something diametrically different, becomes a statement or conclusion about my existence, contingent on my thinking. I think, therefore I am. For Descartes and those who followed him, the individual entity is the singular point of reality. Everything begins with me. Think how different that is from the biblical witness about reality, grounded in the exchange between God and Moses. Moses finds himself inexplicably having a conversation with a voice from a bush. “What's your name,” he asks. “I Am who I Am.” So far from “I think therefore I am.” God says, “I Am, now learn to think in ways you never imagined.”

We have a lot of learning to do about how to think. Because we've got a scientific, logic-oriented limit to our thinking, we believe only what we can see, we trust only what we can figure, we conclude only what we can think.

The search for truth becomes a search for a collection of irrefutable knowledge. If you can prove something, if you can reason your way to it, then it's true. If you can't prove something, if you can't reason your way to it, then it's likely not reality. It might be your opinion, but it's not True. Paul Davies, one of the world's most respected physicists, whose work is exploring the outer realm of knowledge of the universe wonders, “Might it not be the case that the reason for existence has no explanation in the usual sense?” And he answers his question, “This does not mean the universe is absurd or meaningless. Only that an understanding of its existence and properties lies outside the usual categories of rational human thought.”

I wonder if this isn't what scripture in Ephesians suggests by hoping we will be strengthened by faith to comprehend and know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. To know something that is beyond what we can know. The irony of that is either fodder for the sharp pencil of a term paper's editor or is a suggestion that there is more to this world, God's world, than we can ever see and reason. Coupled with the blessing that we may be filled with the fullness of God, this passage is suggesting there is a different wisdom than mere human reason. With God, something else can be happening beyond what we can see and figure.

We might think about that when we are in a tough spot in life and it seems there's no way out. We might think about it when we endure troubles of all kinds. Maybe something else is happening here beyond what I can see. We might also think about it when we seem to have met a dead end where there seems to be no way forward and we can't go backwards.

We might think about those disciples on the hillside with Jesus that day. A large crowd had gathered to hear Jesus teach and preach about the big questions of life: What is the meaning of life, who is God, how are we to live? When Jesus talked, people said He taught unlike the other teachers. The other teachers, the scribes, would recite the mundane proscriptions of legal requirements and rehearse the agreed-upon doctrines of religion. The authority of their message wasn't an outgrowth of a profound, growing fullness of God; it was religion. When Jesus spoke, it was like something happened inside you. People were amazed by Him.

And they were hungering for it in the depths of their souls. And so are we. I saw a recent lament from a churchgoer somewhere, "Frankly, I'm to the point where there isn't that much that a pastor/teacher is going to be able to say that I haven't heard 100 times already." And he is probably right, but that's nothing new. Even Ecclesiastes notes that, "there's nothing new under the sun." So the observation that a pastor can't say something I haven't already heard is something that itself has been heard before. What is relatively new, I think, is the perceived reduction of preaching and teaching to just an event to learn something. That's not how it was when Jesus taught. In other words, rather than spiritual formation, we chase information gathering. Church becomes just about learning more 'truths' to 'apply' to life. We need knowledge, we need to learn. I think our children's ministry and youth ministry in particular are doing a good job and will continue to do a better job of teaching, just simply teaching, the Bible and theology to our children and youth and helping parents to do the same. There's a place for it. And we all need it and want it. (And let's be honest about adults—most of us don't know as much about the bible and theology as we'd like to think we do). But spiritual formation is more than that. It's more than knowledge about God; it's even more than knowledge of God; it's even more than an experience of a relationship with God. According to Ephesians, it's about having the fullness of God dwell in you. The learning, the information, is just the first steps.

I think that's what Jesus' hearers started to experience when He taught. He wasn't just doing an information dump. He was laying bare the mysteries of the universe. It wasn't just truths; it was truth. It was beyond mere intellectual ascent. It was the nectar of the soul. And they were desperately hungry for it. So hungry for it that they followed Jesus around an entire lake to be there when He got to the other side so they could just hear Him again. Just hearing His voice filled them. They were hungry for it. But they were also hungry, you know, for food.

And that's when amazing started. That's when eyes were opened to a knowledge beyond knowledge, a truth beyond logic, a mystery beyond reality, possible beyond impossible. Beyond interestingly informative, this was decisively formative. What happened was so significant in their growth as followers of Jesus that all four gospel writers include it. It's one of the few they all share in common. The people are hungry.

Jesus turns to His disciples, ‘So, where are we going to get food for all these people?’ Now, the disciples aren’t dumb. They may not have had a formal education, but they can see just as well as any man. ‘We don’t have it.’ A half a year’s salary wouldn’t provide enough for all these people to have just a bite to eat. We don’t have it and nothing is going to change that.

This is a perfectly reasonable response from a human. “I think therefore I am, Jesus.” “I can think for myself, therefore I am perfectly confident in my reasoning of what is possible and what is impossible.” Each of us has a certain framework to our understanding of the world. Some things work. Some don’t. When apples fall off the tree, they fall down. When clouds shed water, you get wet. When you walk on water, you sink. When you tell a storm to be quiet, you just look foolish. When you are dead and buried, you stay that way. The logic of human existence is tight and foolproof. It’s not wrong. It’s just limited.

When you have thousands of hungry people and nothing but a little boy’s lunch of five loaves and two fishes, what do you have? Not much. The same thing you have in a broken-down marriage, a dead-end career, a doctor’s painful diagnosis. You’ve got not much—not much chance, not much hope, not much of anything. Or do you? What do you have when you have any of these things plus you have a God in whom impossible is possible? You just may have more than you realize.

One wisdom teacher, reflecting on our universal human blindness to God’s mystery, puts it like this: “We are knee deep in a river, searching for water.” Think of those disciples on that hillside, frustrated that all they hold in their hands is five loaves and two fishes in the face of thousands of hungry people, racing around, looking for something else, some way to make the supply meet the demand. Holding those five loaves and two fishes that in a moment Jesus will bless, break, and give, and have enough to feed all these people and have 12 baskets left over, they don’t know it, they can’t see it, but they are knee deep in bread, still looking for lunch.

I was that way. About the time I started seminary, I went through a time of intense skepticism about faith. It wasn’t doubt so much as I guess it was cold feet. Going into seminary sort of marks you as someone who really believes all of this. After all, you are going to be trained and equipped to preach it and teach it. So you better believe it. So perhaps like a groom on the night before a wedding, I was getting cold feet, seeing warts on my bride (metaphorically speaking of course). Basically, I wanted to know, is this all real or is it some sort of great big apostolic blunder machine?

I went to seminary needing to have my questions answered. Which I know seems odd. You would think that someone would go to seminary who would have all the answers figured out on at least the big questions. But that’s not always true. Neither people sitting in pews or sitting in seminary classrooms always have all the big questions worked out, they just take it one step at a time, with a general trust that even if they don’t have the answers, the answers are out there if they keep walking. That’s why we recite the Creed from time to time. Even if you struggle to recite it, that’s not the point. It’s not the point that you can’t right now in this moment completely defend every point in the Creed. It’s more the point that we submit ourselves with trust to a greater Logic than our

own and a faith that extends past our doubts. Faith is not the absence of doubt. Faith is trusting through doubt.

So I went to seminary, looking for a place, for a teacher, who wasn't afraid to confront hard questions and didn't just sling fast-food answers. I wanted to look in the eyes of someone really smart and know they believed. I wondered if everything I'd been taught in Sunday School and VBS, and college BSU wasn't a party line, wasn't a carefully-manufactured system to promote and rehearse. I wondered if Christendom weren't Oz, a beautiful, magical place with a yellow brick road, a convenient wicked witch, and a distant emerald city as a promise for walking the road. I wanted to pull back the curtain and be absolutely sure that no one, no system, no denomination, no church was pulling the levers and turning the wheels, and pretending to speak for God. I desperately needed to pull back the curtain and find no one there. To push to the limits of the breadth, height, depth, and length of human knowledge and find that there was still more than a wink and a shush, a greater truth, a mystery beyond reason and explanation. I needed mystery. I was hungry for it, desperate for it. Desperate for Jesus to be more than the church's mascot for cultural domination. I needed him to be authentic and beyond my grasp because I knew fundamentally that if the answers about Jesus were as easy as some of the denominational leaders made it sound, then all of this was pretty bogus and frankly, not worth my time, and certainly not my vocation.

I don't want to overdramatize all of this. But I suspect many of us have felt similarly. This prayer in Ephesians is the kind of prayer that took root in me, "that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through God's Spirit." And "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are rooted and grounded in love."

For me, I found what I was looking for in the eyes and teaching of a particular professor who taught about God using the Creed and didn't twitch or blink when he taught what it means to say, "I believe in God the Father, maker of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ his only begotten Son, our Lord." He was brilliant, but his faith came from a place deeper than his intellect and reached farther than his understanding.

It's truth that's been passed down through the generations, a truth in words that is also the truth of this bread that is blessed, broken, and given as a gift of the abundant grace of God, and is the work of God in not just our mouths and stomachs, but also our souls, a work by the one who is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine and whose glory is in the church and Jesus Christ forever and ever. And in you today. You who receive this gift of abundance in faith, and share it one to another in love. You who find a logic beyond human reason that this bread is more than for filling growling tummies. It is sign of the enduring, eternal, magnificent, saving love of Jesus Christ. For those who eat this bread and drink this cup together as worship, it's out of the question and into the mystery. Amen.

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