

THE MYSTERY HIDDEN FOR AGES

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

At the beginning of M. Night Shyamalan's film, *The Sixth Sense*, Bruce Willis plays a disheartened psychologist, Dr. Malcolm Crowe, who helps a boy who is troubled because the boy can see and speak to the dead. At the beginning of the film, Willis is shot by an ex-patient of his who has broken into his apartment. And at the end of that first scene, Willis is lying on the bed bleeding and moaning in agony, as the camera backs away, and sirens are heard in the distance.

A few months later, Willis is being recruited to counsel the boy who sees and speaks to the dead. And the story is about the boy's therapy, what he sees and experiences and the relationship between him and Willis.

In the last scene of the film, the break-in to Willis's apartment is re-lived and we realize that in seeing it played out that the film is not a flashback, but has unfolded exactly as it happened. At the beginning of the film, Willis' character died. Our eyes saw it. But our mind did not understand it. It's not our expectation that the lead actor in a film will be killed in the first few minutes of the story, and then appear as a participant in the rest of the film. But of course, the clues were abundant if we had only paid attention. No one ever really spoke to Willis again in the film or heard him speak, save the boy *who spoke to the dead*.

If only we had paid attention to the clues and understood what we saw at the outset, we would have realized that all we needed to know was right before our eyes all along. We just needed someone to explain it so that we could make sense of what we had seen and heard.

It is not too broad a leap from there to understanding the passage today from Ephesians, as we hear an explanation of how Paul has understood the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that now it might be made known and understood by everyone. Of course, what he is talking about is the coming of God among us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The next step after celebrating the birth of Jesus, the whole of these past four weeks leading to Christmas and our extravagant celebration of the day itself, is to ask, "And what was that all about?" The answer the church gives is, Epiphany, an obscure season in the liturgical calendar characterized by its hallmark story, the arrival of the Three Magi who came bearing gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh which they lay before the newborn Christ child. In their coming to him, they portray what the whole world will do, even the great and powerful as well as the lowly and common; come to worship and kneel before Jesus Christ as Lord, the messiah of whom the prophets foretold, and Israel waited all that long time before he came.

It's an odd word, Epiphany, and it makes us think about sudden discoveries. Eureka moments. Its origins are in Greek, and in the original it meant to uncover, to take the lid off and look inside like you would with a pot simmering on the stove... in other words, to reveal.

It's a dramatic way of saying that in the coming of Jesus Christ, God has shown something important to us that we need to know in order to figure out the puzzle that is laid before us. The puzzle called life. The puzzle called meaning. The puzzle that asks who am I, and who are all these other people, and what are we doing here, and where is it all going? Or else is history, as Henry Ford said, just one damned thing after another?

You look at the world today and you might conclude that damnation has indeed broken loose. The body count in Iraq, the daily suicide attacks, the sectarian fighting, the terrorism, our soldiers caught in the crossfire, the saber rattling in the Middle East, it's out of control. Whatever sense we might make of life is hidden from our eyes over there.

Here in the city, homelessness is still a problem even in a mild winter. It gets cold on the street at night when all you have to protect you from the elements is a cardboard box. And what does it mean to be one of the wealthiest nations on earth and still have people who cannot afford a place to sleep at night? Some things we see every day make no sense.

And people are hungry. 1.2 Million people in this city do not get enough nutrition every day. A third of them are children according to the New York City Coalition Against Hunger. The fastest-growing populations at emergency food programs are working parents, children, and senior citizens. Stack against that the fact that some hedge fund managers are seeing holiday bonuses of tens of millions of dollars. And when he was fired this week Robert Nardelli, the CEO of Home Depot took home a settlement payment of \$210 million. That's a lot of 2x4's and penny nails for a severance check.

No wonder life seems a bit puzzling, and the world seems out of joint; because the world is out of joint. It's all messed up. And what we see of life is puzzling.

We struggle with more modest problems in our own lives. The world's problems are so big we try to ignore them, even though they spill over to our own experience every now and then, as they did on 9/11 and as we are constantly warned they may again.

Many of us find our own life's problems can paralyze us. Work is always on our minds. We worry about getting a job, and after we have one we worry about keeping it. We struggle with impossible bosses who lay on absurd measures of performance, or who are incapable of giving praise, which makes work all the more burdensome. I know some of you come to church with your briefcase in hand and slip it under the pew during worship, because even Sunday is a workday now.

We worry about our kids and what they experience in school, who is bullying them, or making them feel out of place, as if they don't belong.

We worry about our health; about a cold you can't shake, a cough that's unlike any you've ever had before, a spot on an x-ray that looks suspicious, a blood test that shows a change in numbers. And suddenly your mortality is staring you in the face.

This time of year, the holidays over, the tree back in the box or out on the sidewalk, the decorations put away and the relatives back home once again, the mailbox is starting to fill with bills not with cards anymore. And the city seems a bit grayer, a bit more cold and indifferent than it did when the carols were playing in the stores and folks were bumping elbows at the Green Market.

I was noticing the other day that all the Christmas decorations at one of the local pharmacies had been removed and replaced with Valentine's Day trinkets and cards. Red boxes of candy, teddy bears with big hearts on them, red candles for romantic lighting. The clerk behind the counter was complaining to another of her co-workers, "I hate Valentine's Day. I never have a boyfriend," she said, "and I hate Valentine's Day."

Nothing is as over as Christmas when it's over. The empty boxes, the pretty paper on the floor, the stray tinsel from the tree with which the cat has played and left abandoned on the sofa, the empty cartons of eggnog stuffed into the trash bag.

Life has come back to normal, whatever that is, and it means that the diversion of the past few weeks, the frenzy and fuss, the lights and glitter are packed away once again like the star at the top of the tree; taken down and carefully wrapped, padded and protected in its ample box. And what is left? A war in Iraq, homeless people sleeping in door stoops, hungry people begging for food, worries about health, kids that concern us, jobs that wear us down. We're back to where we left off before the holidays.

So what was it that happened, and did it really mean anything? Was all that fuss about Christmas just so much blow and bluster? Well maybe for the first time in the whole running of the season, we can step back and look at it one more time, over our shoulder and have an epiphany, a realization that the annual celebration of the birth of Jesus, is more than an elaborate orgy of expensive excess and extravagant indulgence.

Like the folks who were left in town after the Lone Ranger had been for a visit, we may ask out loud, "Who was that masked man?" Or better said, "Who was that babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, left lying in a manger?"

And the answer we hear in the letter to the Ephesians is, he is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things.

For Paul, a Jew of the first century, a convert to the Way of Christ, he and his people had longed for the messiah, the anointed one who would come to reign as David had reigned once as king of Israel. That Messiah would restore Israel's fortune as a nation and people, overthrowing the Roman oppressors, restoring hope and establishing justice for the poor, the widow and orphan, the forgotten of Israel.

They expected a king, they wanted a ruler, they looked for a soldier in battle triumphant. What they got was a child gently laid in a manger, a bringer of peace, a lamb silent before its shearer, a savior who would give his life for all people.

He taught us when stricken to turn the other cheek, never to return evil for evil. He taught us to pray for our enemies, to forgive not seven, but seventy-seven times. He taught us that God is like a father who welcomes a prodigal home, like a mother who gathers her chicks under her wings. He taught us to love one another, to let our light shine, our saltiness be salty. He taught us to forgive one another as we have been forgiven; and so to live that others may see our good works and give thanks to God in heaven.

The mystery hidden for ages, is Jesus Christ, the love of God made manifest in flesh and blood, who hallows our flesh with heavenly substance and in so doing reaffirms God's first instinct about us when God said, "That's good."

I look at the world sometimes and the way in which religion is used to divide rather than unite, to separate rather than to join, to hurt rather than to heal, and wonder if God could possibly be much pleased with the way in which we faithful followers of Judaism and Islam and Christianity (in particular) are living out our faith.

I see Islamic suicide bombers dying to prove their love of God by killing innocent people living their common lives. I see arrogant Christians treating Jews as if Judaism has been superseded by a superior faith. I see Presbyterians and Episcopalians and Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics arguing among themselves, investing more energy in fighting about nonessentials of the faith than they do in discussing the substantive issues which are key to drawing God's people together, and which by their very nature delay the coming of the commonwealth of God.

I see race dividing us rather than delighting us. I see war where there should be peace. I see prejudice damaging the souls of people who don't even know that's what's wrong with them. I see people being denied the right to legally declare and seal the love that binds their lives together. I see the world that God loves so much and wonder why God bothers with us any more. We have so wandered and strayed from God's fondest hopes for us.

And yet, the mystery hidden for ages in God is that we are worth it, that God so loves this world in spite of its broken, ungrateful, warring, graceless, and sinful ways that God has given us himself in the guise of a child.

That was what we went to the stable to find; a better hope than we have yet realized in this despairing time, a brighter light than we have yet seen in this dark world, a greater love than we have yet known, the love of God made manifest among us in the gift of a savior.

It is also what the magi went to find, though I doubt they knew exactly that, save the fact that a star guided them on the way to a place most unlikely where God shined most brightly.

It is why we keep coming back to the table that is set before us, to remember the mystery hidden for ages in God, no longer a mystery, but plainly known in Jesus Christ, that God's love exceeds our hate, that God's compassion exceeds our hurt, that God's forgiveness bridges all that stands between us.

So come be a guest at this table, there's a place set for you. You'll need your strength for the journey ahead, and there is much to be done with what we now know, the mystery hidden for all ages is now revealed, Emmanuel, God is with us.

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