

## *Mastery and Mystery*

Exodus 16: 1-15      John 6: 25-35

Reality is something that's surprisingly overwhelming. If you start listening to scientists talking about the properties of light and time and space, you can feel your brain twisting like pretzel. It almost starts to make sense, and then you realize that in your mental contortions, you really have no idea how you got where you ended up. As your brain starts to cramp from all of the wound-up tension, there is only one thing to do. You let your mind unravel like a spinning top, feel relief, and put such overwhelming reality out of your mind. Then you switch channels to Mister Rogers Neighborhood to absorb something that *is* within your mental grasp.

Our belief systems tend to be oriented to things that are material and literal. We're able to grasp and understand things that have substance and clear identity. For instance, we know that there's lots of talk about global warming and climate change, but ask ten average Marion County citizens to explain something as simple as "the greenhouse effect" and how it might lead to global warming, and what do you think would happen? A lot of open mouthed ahhhh-ing would likely happen before admitting that they didn't know.

If I can touch it, see it, hear it, measure it, or experience it tangibly, then it fits into my sphere of understanding. Or if I can identify it, name it, and rationally grasp it, then it, too, fits into my sphere of understanding. With the orientation of our belief systems rooted emphatically in substance and identity - the material and literal - we then subject everything in our world into terms that coincide with our belief system.

The benefit of this system of belief is that we become **masters** of all that we experience. By reducing everything to terms that we can comprehend, that has meaning, value and utility for us, we become masters of our lives and our experiences. And by making everything material and literal, and making ourselves the masters, then it's a short step to seeing everything in the world of our experience as existing entirely for our purposes. Let me say it again because it's important. By making everything material and literal, and asserting ourselves as the **masters** of that reality, then it's a short step to seeing everything in the world of our experience as existing entirely for our own purposes.

I'm sure you see the flaws in this scheme already. The first flaw is that not everything is material and literal. The second flaw is that our comprehension of things is admittedly quite limited. The third flaw is that we are not masters of our lives and experiences. The final flaw is that we don't begin to grasp what's happening around us, and tend not to give it much value in our self-absorbed worldview.

Among the missing pieces are the poetic and spiritual dimensions of experience. Poetry and music seek to capture a particular something special that transcends the literal and awakens inspiration at a spiritual level. We see the importance of music in worship. This can often be an indescribable experience. When we say 'music has charms

to soothe the savage breast,' we acknowledge that even the most brutish, out of control person can be moved to a different plane by the poetic and spiritual. We can all experience it, and we can all be left speechless by it. But we also find the limit of our control and mastery, and find ourselves submitting to a force that's otherworldly, beyond us, transcendent.

So we must admit that not everything is material and literal, and that we are not masters of all things. Our worldview, our life-view is flawed and partial. When we open the door to what is beyond experience, the spiritual and transcendent, we discover a force and power that may make us uncomfortable.

That discomfort comes from its **mystery** that eludes our **mastery**. Our worldview is broken because we see this gaping hole, and realize there is an entirety that we cannot grasp, but must reckon with nonetheless. Today's scriptures show people trying to assert mastery when they need to accept mystery.

We encounter God's people in the story of the Exodus out in the desert wilderness and not liking their travel experience too much. They have been out there for weeks now, and whatever provisions they brought with them from Egypt are gone. Instead of petitioning God for relief, having seen how God took care of them through the entire liberation and flight from Egypt, they become surly.

*If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.*

Okay, they are not only insolent, but they've gone stupid, too. If God wanted to kill them, God could have walked away at any time and left them to die. To think God has now decided to kill them off is just plain stupid.

Besides, the way they've glorified their days in slavery is downright ridiculous. Really, the Hebrew slaves were chowing down pot roasts and eating bread until they were stuffed? That only happened in their wildest fantasies. But they do think that somehow they were better off enslaved in Egypt because at least they could make their own decisions and believe in their own mastery of their destiny. They feel like they've lost that in God's liberation and leading them around the desert wilderness.

Now they're giving God a good reason to wonder why he should continue supporting an obviously ungrateful, sullen, and even stupid people. In fact, this would be a good time to teach these mealy mouthed ingrates a lesson they'll never forget. You know, if you teach them 'who's the boss' now, it will make things a lot easier later. That's the way it is with kids, and the Israelites are acting just like spoiled brats. Don't give them anything until they show some respect. In fact, make them earn their keep. Make them do something, anything. This way they'll understand that when they do the **right** thing, they get a **reward**, not a handout. Train them like Pavlov's dog.

These are brilliant insights, of course, drawn from the wisdom we find so common all around us. We know there will be no more problems with these people if God follows that tried-and-true prescription for behavior modification.

But God apparently took God's own counsel – thank goodness! – and without even a hint of reluctance, God immediately caved in and gave the Israelites everything they wanted, probably more. *I will rain down bread from heaven for you* in the morning, and their camp was covered in quails in the evening. The bread was called *manna*, or “what is it?” Everyone saw this stuff on the ground in the morning and all you could hear were people saying *Manna? Manna?* - literally translated “what is it.”

“What is it” would also describe God's plan for teaching the Israelites; what is it? What exactly is your lesson plan, God, if you're simply going to give it away at the first whimper of the Israelites?

There is nothing fair about this in the way we know fairness. The whole lot of them deserved nothing, had learned nothing from it, and would be complaining again before long. God had rewarded their bad behavior, and sure enough, the bad behavior would persist.

Actually, God was teaching them, and yes, they would be difficult students. Listen for God's lesson plan: *The Lord spoke to Moses and said, 'I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, "At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; **then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.**"'* The divine lesson was **self-disclosure**, and nothing better described that self-disclosure than **God's grace**. It is hard to fathom, definitely undeserved, and abundant in every way. There were limitations, but nothing was rationed, nothing held back, nothing required any special hurdles to surmount or to qualify. There wasn't even an affirmation of faith and they were blessed with gracious abundance.

Mastery was what they thought they wanted, and was what they thought they *required*. They even believed that they might gain mastery over God. Yet what they really needed was to experience the mystery of God's undeserved grace and providence for God's people. Needless to say, the people weren't prepared for the divine response of gracious, abundant blessing. Therefore, the lesson would need repeating over and over again, and a case could be made that they never quite got over that requirement for mastery. You can go back to last week's discussion of the Garden of Eden and the allure of becoming like God.

Feeding and manna also form the theme in the story in John's gospel. Previous to this account was the feeding of the five thousand. As a result of the feeding, the people believe Jesus is the Promised Messiah and Jesus escapes them, fearing that they'll try to make him king.

Then there is the crossing the Sea of Galilee story and Jesus walking on water.

Jesus is over in Capernaum, and the crowds from the previous story track him down and find him. When Jesus sees them, he tells them that the only reason they've sought him out is because they got free bread. They have a desire for *physical* bread when Jesus is trying to address them in *spiritual* terms. They're becoming rather frustrated and confused.

They want material, literal proof that he can deliver, again and again. They want miracles. They want answers. Oh, they *want* what he's got, but they're unable to understand the spiritual authority of Jesus. They aren't interested in this spiritual stuff – the mystery of his ministry that they can't fathom. They want the experience, the material and literal proof. 'Show us more bread; show us other stuff!' Jesus isn't interested in providing a magical, miracle show.

He tells them: *Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.* They ignore most of what he says by asking only: *What must we **do** to do the works God requires?* Notice how they have made it all about themselves. The question could be taken several ways. For example, what must we do to do *miracles*? Or, what must we do as in performing the Torah-Law? Or, if they were paying a bit of attention to Jesus' words, what must they do to gain eternal life?

Jesus points to himself as the Son of Man, to believe in him, but they aren't happy with that. They return to demanding signs, recalling the manna in the wilderness. Jesus even tries to turn this remark into a lesson, too, noting that the manna came from God, not Moses. Jesus came from God to give life to the world. They need to believe in him. Of course, this means that they don't need to **do** *anything* except believe in Jesus, follow him and the way of his teaching. The response of the people: 'Oh, yeah. That's the bread we want – give us *that* eternal, imperishable bread.'

Jesus again points back to himself, being as direct as he possibly can be: *I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.* And he will go on to note how they still won't recognize him or believe in him and follow him.

Those who cannot or will not look beyond their world *as they know it* will most often fail to comprehend the spiritual and skip the embrace of the mystery of God who has come to bring new life for all.

Listen for the mystery, the message that enlivens you to the Spirit of God. Let God come to you unconstrained by your expectations, letting go of your sense of security and your confidence based on your mastery. Embrace instead the complex and confounding quality of mystery in a God who comes to be with us, whose grace brings us eternal promise. All we need to do is believe.