

Let the Mystery Be©

A sermon by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz

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Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis

Just four days ago, many of us were glued to our screens, wondering if a miracle would happen. On that day, the miracle was whether or not a metal can, entering the atmosphere of Mars millions of miles away, would withstand the heat of entry, and would fall to the planet's surface, landing at precisely the right moment in time and place. The tension was almost unbearable. And then, like an eagle unfolding its wings, NASA's Insight Lander chirped that it was safe and fanned out its solar panels and began to recharge its batteries. The scientists at NASA erupted into cheers, with two of their employees doing a little high-five dance usually reserved for basketball players.

I was young at the height of the space race, but the recent film about Neil Armstrong's landing on the moon reminded me of the feeling of those days – that we would reach the heavens and beyond, putting our little tiny bodies into the enormity of space; not only for the thrill of intellectual and scientific achievement – but of something more – something much vaster – to plunge ourselves headlong and full bodied into the twinkling truth that is the night sky; the mystery embodied in those three questions we sang this morning: *Where did we come from? What are we? Where are we going?* Although we can and do answer those questions in the short term – they require us to dig deeper.

We answer those questions with the chorus – the only final answer we can truly speak: “mystery, mystery, life is a riddle and a mystery...”

I borrowed the title for today's sermon from a song by one of my favorite singer-songwriters Iris DeMent. Iris has an amazing ability to package a deep theological meditation into four verses of a country song, and as she takes up some of those same questions we have been singing about this morning, her answer at the end of each chorus is “Let the Mystery Be”.

I have trouble letting the mystery be during this most poignant of the religious holiday seasons in my own emotional life – this season between

Thanksgiving and Christmas. It's a time of the year that continues to bring with it many emotions; some of them memories of past time and some of them current experiences; some of them exhilarating, some of them sad; almost all of them complex. Maybe that's true for you as well. We may love the way the calendar leads us towards that most exquisite of nights known as the winter solstice, the longest night of the year – or, we may fear the encroaching darkness. We may enjoy the secular rituals that have arisen around the holiday of Christmas; putting up a Christmas tree, decorating the home, bringing forth that perfectly ugly holiday sweater. Or, we may have apprehension about the way this season reminds us of losses; of broken family ties, of people whom we love who are no longer with us.

This time of year, with its lessening light feels like time out of time; liminal space they call it, threshold time, a time to nod off before a fireplace; a time to stare back into that night sky and wonder; a time to ponder the mystery of our existence.

So it feels right that this morning we are beginning a month of sermons looking at the theme of mystery. We will be look at the mystery of life and of this season through poetry and music and reflections passed through the lens of both science and religion. My hope for this month of Sundays is that it can help all of us develop that spiritual patience which creates allow time and space in our lives to appreciate all that is in this season which we cannot comprehend; that which is beyond our knowing.

Although I struggle with the commercial nature of Christmas, what I do appreciate is the way that this time of plentiful religious holidays connects me – connects us – with ancient stories; with people who lived thousands of years before us, who could not have even imagined that one day a human foot would be walking on the moon; or that some strange metal bird would unfold its wings on that tiny red dot in the sky; people like the writers of the Psalms whom you heard in one of the readings this morning. We heard a Psalm so nakedly awestruck by mystery it readily speaks to us today across the millenia. I imagine this ancient writer, like me, looking up into the sky and scratching out on his papyrus not a fact, but a feeling – a feeling that he cannot quite explain, the

presence of something so great he has no name for it, but says “such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.” Who is the you? Most simply say the Psalmist speaks of God – a short hand way of saying that which is beyond all knowing – that understanding which is beyond the reaches of our human mind. *Mystery, mystery, life is a riddle and mystery.*

We who gather in this church are a people who live between two Sources upon which our faith draws: the first source of Unitarian Universalism invites us to be drawn towards “direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life.” The second to the last source draws upon humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of mind and spirit.” I see both of these as intimately interconnected; living not in tension with one another but profoundly intertwined. To see ourselves as rational people does not negate that we are also mystics. To understand ourselves as mystics – that is, a people who believe in spiritual apprehension of truths beyond the intellect - does not eliminate our need to comprehend the facts of science.

Inevitably in a Unitarian Universalist church, a series of sermons around the theme of Mystery will raise questions about which of the intellectual disciplines - theology or science – are best equipped to give us answers to the greatest mysteries we can imagine: How and why did the universe come into being? What is life and how did it arise? And, Why are we here?

Our sermons this month will not be exempt from that inevitability, but I hope that they avoid making us feel that we somehow have to choose between science and theology. Both Rev. John Crestwell and Leika Lewis Cornwell will take on both of these topics in the next couple of Sunday services. Although theology – the study of God – can sometimes be in tension with science – the study of nature - in recent decades we have found they have more in common than anyone previously imagined, especially when we try to explain the

Great Mystery in language that average people can understand and appreciate.

My husband has recently been re-reading Stephen Hawking’s “A Brief History of Time” just for fun. (That’s the kind of fun guy he is !) So as I was thinking about this sermon, I asked him – “What did you learn about the basic stuff of the universe? What are we made of?”

And he said, “Well, the smallest unit of matter that we’ve been able to detect is a quark, but there are a different kinds of quarks. They come in six flavors – up, down, strange, charmed, bottom, and top – and in three colors – red, green, and blue”.

“All right then !” I said. “Thanks for nothing”.

But I could have just as easily said “Thanks for everything”, depending on how deeply I wanted to go into what these mysterious words “quark” and “strange” and “colors” actually represent. They are essentially poetry and metaphor, just as theology is inevitably poetry and metaphor. When Christians say that “the Word became flesh” to talk about the relationship of infinite creativity with mortal humanity, they are using the most expressive words they can find to talk about something we will never fully understand. The science of physics does the same thing, except that it uses the languages of mathematics to support theories of how we came to be and what life consists of. Relatively few people understand the deeper language of mathematics, so in order to explain what that language point to, the scientists return to poetry and metaphor. The word “quark” first appears in the work of the Irish poet James Joyce, and everyone knows that whatever quarks are, they don’t really have colors or flavors as we understand those words.

The debates between science and religion will rage on of course, and we must counter every idolatry of the mind and of the spirit with scientific truth. We have landed spacecraft on Mars not by sheer chance or magic, but by astonishing intellectual and physical labor.

And yet, as that metal baby landed softly on Mars surface, I felt like the Psalmist of old, or like the Magi staring up at the sky with awe and wonder, marveling not only at the human achievement but

the sheer beauty - and strangeness -- of a planet and a universe I can barely begin to comprehend.

We're all trying to express the inexpressible, and the more we try, in as many different languages as we can find, the more deeply we appreciate that "not-knowing" may be as valuable an attitude to foster about the Great Mystery as curiosity.

Religion – and religious language is our human way of trying to make visible that which is invisible. The Christian religion teaches two big mysteries; one is incarnation and the other, of course, is resurrection. Both of them are not scientifically provable. The idea of incarnation – of God made flesh – of divinity living in a human body has been the source of endless theological debates, going all the way back to the council of Nicea in 325 CE. What is the nature of divinity, these ancients wondered? What qualities does a person need to possess to be called "divine" or to be worshipped as a God?

One of our theological ancestors, the 3rd century Bishop Arius of Alexandria, argued against the belief that Jesus was all human and all divine in co-equal parts; essentially downplaying Jesus' divinity. The debate got so heated that at one point, Arius was slapped across the face by Bishop Nicolas of Myra – later known as Saint Nicholas – yes, the very one venerated and ultimately known to us as good Saint Nick. What the debaters at the Council of Nicea missed about whether or not Jesus was born divine or human or a little bit of both/and was something even more extraordinary – something we now take for granted in this church. Through the centuries, liberal thinkers began to reframe and rethink the very nature of divinity. Could it be possible that the incarnation – or the indwelling of God – is actually something which is accessible to everyone? Could it be that divinity – or that essence which connects and inspires human beings to do extraordinary acts of community-building and courage – might that actually be within us all? That's the insight that a Unitarian Universalist Christian like me takes from this season. That right now, obscured by the tinsel and folderol, in and among the tins of cookies and holiday parties and endless recitations of the Night Before Christmas, we are waiting to commemorate a deeper mystery, a mystery summarized in that

paradoxical poetic claim that 'the Word became flesh'.

This particular faith tradition of ours loves to ask questions and does not settle for easy answers. My father used to tell the story of his leaving the faith of his childhood, because when he asked questions, like "well, how can a baby be born of a virgin?" and "how can a person come back from the dead?" he was told: "It's a mystery of faith, and you don't question God's word." As a result, he became more interested in science than religion and his faith was grounded in what he could tangibly prove as a fact.

That rubbed off on me too, as I wanted to find a religion that put its faith in more than sheer mystery, easy answers and an unquestioned theology. Yet, what was lost in the purity of that approach, was a capacity for religious language, stories and ideas be adopted as deep metaphor for greater truths. I don't have to believe that Jesus was born of a virgin to know that that this birth was holy, as all births are. I don't have to challenge the truths of his divinity to believe that the way he lived his life and the fact that we're still talking about him 2000 years later - is divinity enough for me. I don't have to believe in an afterlife to feel that at my own life's end, I will join a great mystery; perhaps souls, perhaps spirit, perhaps found in the very dust that makes up the surface of Mars. I'm content to let that mystery be.

In her song, Iris Dement writes "Everybody's wonderin' what and where they all came from ; Everybody's worryin' 'bout where they're gonna go when the whole thing's done; But no one knows for certain; And so it's all the same to me; I think I'll just... let the mystery be. To know there are worlds of science and of faith that are still beyond my human imagination, that will be explored long after I am gone, is oddly enough, a comfort to me.

I want to close by circling back to the 2nd reading you heard this morning, from the Chet Raymo, Professor of Physics and Astronomy. He writes: "*As I lie on my back and the light of 10,000 stars enters my eyes. Ten thousand subtle but distinct wavelets of energy enter my eyes at slightly different angles from out of the depths of space, and by some miracle my eyes and brain sort it all out,*

put each star in its proper place, recognize the familiar patterns of the constellations, and open my soul to a universe whose length and breadth exceed my wildest imagining...I have a friend who speaks of knowledge as an island in a sea of mystery. Let this then, be the ground of my faith: All that we know, now and forever, all scientific knowledge that we have of this world, or ever will have, is as an island in the sea.

So here we are together, sharing an island in a sea. Sometimes it feels like a pretty busy and overwhelming island --- so much so that we barely notice the vast expanse that stretches out to the horizons of our knowledge and surrounds us everywhere we look if we only raise our eyes from the sand on the beach of our understanding.

My prayer for me and for you, for all of us, this morning is that amidst the rush and roar of this season, we will find a way to allow some of that vast horizon into our lives; that we will find a way to take some time to steep ourselves in all that we don't know; that we will find a way to honor where we are curious and where we are amazed and where we are fearful, and trust that all of these feelings are OK. My prayer for me and for all of us this morning is that we will find a way this holiday season to -- let the mystery be.