

“In Christ”: Turbulence

Text: Galatians 2:20

9.17.17



Reflection questions... [please consider the teaching notes, first, as a basis of your reflections]

“Have you ever heard anyone say that they were ‘more spiritual than religious’? What do you think they meant by that? Do you see the two as distinct?” (James seems to suggest, not, “no religion”, but “pure religion”, 1:27)

“Was your faith something you feel you ‘inherited’? When did it feel like it became ‘your own’?”

“Paul uses the word, ‘mystery’, over (20) times. It doesn’t mean, “something we can’t know”, but “something previously unknown, now being revealed.” In that context, what do you think Paul means by saying that the mystery of God is ‘in Christ’?”

“Have you found it difficult, at times, to talk about your own spiritual experiences? Have you found, at times, that you have been hesitant to share your experiences with others for fear of their skepticism?” (Of, for fear that they may recommend a good psycho-therapist ☺?)

“Has your own particular faith-formation allowed much space for ‘mystery’? Was there a point in your own journey with God where he became more than a religious concept or theory, and you knew something had changed?”

“Where in your life might a holy sense of curiosity allow you to risk that such a God-encounter might be possible?” (Matthew 13 “... Jesus didn’t do many miracles there because they were indifferent...”)

“Where in your life do you suspect that God has been present, but perhaps you have been unaware?”

Teaching Notes...

I think Christianity, when it is at its best (i.e. when we are embodying it authentically), ...

... is able to connect the deeper longings of our heart to our desire for God.

... values “knowing”, but is perpetually surprised by grace.

... can envision a higher goal for our lives than “morality”.

... reminds us that beyond our irritability, our impulsiveness, our tendencies toward isolation, our eating and drinking too much, is a “battle”--- a war against everything I formerly trusted, and from which I am having difficulty living free.

... refuses to offer people some “*moral regimen*” which allows them to applaud their good behavior, but ignore their disorderly heart.

... loves a good mystery.

Somewhere along the line, the mystery of having a life-altering encounter with the “formerly-dead”, Jesus gave way to power-point presentations and lifeless rituals which, frankly, have left us unaffected.

I think that for those of us who, “*teach God*”, we get hamstrung by our commitment to “*presenting God*”; to resolving paradoxes and solving mysteries. We have discussions about God instead of dialogue with God. “*Presence*” is forfeited for ritual. It allows us to standardize faith and make it more manageable.

Mysteries don’t get resolved or explained, they get ‘*pondered*’; you ‘*mumble*’ over them (def. of ‘meditate’), you don’t articulate them. You “*enter*” mysteries, not for the purpose of defining them, but for the purpose of being able to describe your experience.

Christianity has never about a list of God-facts and conduct codes to which we would all ‘nod our heads’ in agreement. It’s been about a vital connection (union) between ourselves and our creator-God whom Paul describes as being “with” us and in” us. He condenses this robust notion into this one, routinely rehearsed and frequently underestimated statement: “*in Christ*” (which he utilizes some 165 times).

It is on the basis of this union, this mysterious connection, that all of the other doctrines of the church are built. Any talk about right relationship with God (righteousness), our identity as loved and valued (election; chosenness), right responses to human inequity (justice), life that reflects our unique relationship (holiness), are all dependent upon our growing understanding and response to the mystery of God, who is Jesus.

“*Discipleship*” is, quite simply, everything we do which allows us to experience our union with Christ most fully, most deeply. Everything that allows us to nurture and accommodate this new reality (Ephesians 4:20).

Being “in Christ” is not about forging a new destiny, or finding a new way forward. It’s about returning to Someone.

This “image of God” idea (Genesis 1:26-27), is like some divine God-code embedded in our DNA. There’s a ‘Deja vu’ effect. It feels strangely like someplace that we have been, or something we’ve known, but *lost*. Something from which we have been separated and to which we are being invited to ‘*return*’. Someone from whom we have been disconnected and are now being ‘reconciled’.

Paul’s focus on “*reconciliation*” implies some previous, vital connection that humanity has experienced (Colossians 1:20; 2 Corinthians 5).

The encounter begins, not with us addressing God (attempting to get God’s attention) but with God calling to us.

Not in some general, “*Insert name here*”, fashion, but calling us by name. “*Moses, Moses...*” (Exodus 3). God always names us before we can name him.

This journey is never completely self-initiated. It always involves some level of “*interference*” (not as an obstacle, but an interruption). It is NOT our movement toward God, but first, God’s movement toward us.

At this point, the, “*Here I am*”, response doesn’t pretend to know anything or understand anything. It simply ‘locates us’. It’s the only place you can be (existential, huh?) We make ourselves present and available to the Presence. And, there is “risk”: “*Who is this God? What do they want from me? What are their intentions toward me? Can they be trusted?*”

Jesus was clear about his intent: “*I have come that you might have life...*” (John 10:10). After centuries of being misunderstood and misrepresented, God wraps himself up in skin and speaks to us in the ‘first person’. He was unapologetic in his insistence upon offering himself as “the way” to such life. He “was” life.

He consciously refused to endorse another way or simply ask that we consider him when as one of many viable options available to us. Why? If he was really life itself, and the means by which we could experience it, then not clearly stating that would have been un-loving.

Our faith anticipates an experience, an encounter with God, that refuses to confuse knowledge about God with the “knowledge of God” (John 17:3).

You can only testify (witness) to God-encounters. You can’t explain them. What the early followers of Jesus had was not a fully-formed theology, but simply an encounter with Jesus. Some confidently claimed that Jesus was the climax of their God-Story. Others had no previous connection to the Story, but were now finding their way into it.

Life in the Kingdom requires a great deal of imagination.

Not ‘imagination’ in the sense of some “virtual or augmented reality”--- a world of my own making--- but a way of seeing what too often goes unnoticed (2 Corinthians 4:18: “*seen and unseen*”).

Paul even prays that “*the eyes of your hearts would be enlightened...*” (Ephesians 1:18). He does not appeal for their doubts or their questions to be eliminated, but that they would be able to, with a holy-imagination, risk believing something else to be true of God and true of themselves.

Ours is a storied faith which invites us to sit with Jesus at the table, to be with the woman in the dirt being pummeled with rocks, to image ourselves as the young son returning home after a year-long frat party. “*Do this to remember me*” (Luke 22). How do we do that without our imagination?

Encounter is marked by...

... Presence.

... awareness of Presence.

... being present with and present for Presence (this was is harder than you think: we are pre-occupied; we are prejudiced; we are guarded).

... posture: the encounter, itself, never seemed to evoke a predictable response, only that one was required.

“*Who are you?*” (Acts 9:5) Here’s where the shift happens. We open ourselves to the God who is beyond our own assumptions.

The Story seems reticent to offer a prescription or a pattern for such encounters, accept that it needs to be “consensual”. A “call and response”, a “turning toward”, a “taste and see”. “*Come near to God and he will come near to you...*” James 4:8)

Remember, “revelation” means that we are not self-explanatory. We don’t find ourselves set in the middle of life and the world, then left to our own devices to come up with an explanation. We are given a Story against which all of our experiences and assumptions are to be interpreted.