

Fourth Sunday in Lent – Year B – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony – 3.14.21
Numbers 21:4-9, Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22, Ephesians 2:1-10, John 3:14-21

I love mysteries. I love to try to fit together all of the clues and come to the resolution before the final chapter. I even love when there is a surprise twist and my solution is faulty. I love mysteries so much that when I am deep in the middle of one I have been known to stay up most of the night to get to the end of the book and see if I came to the correct conclusion.

There is a downside to a really good mystery though. When I come to the end of the book, there is a brief satisfaction in having the answer. For a moment I can savor the outcome, but then comes a slight feeling of emptiness because what I have been immersed in is now a memory. The pursuit of the solution was more satisfying than knowing the resolution to the riddle.

Mystery is the term often used to describe our relationship with God. The science of theology, like a well written fictional mystery, is the attempt to put together what is known, what can be discovered and what can be concluded into a provisional solution to the issue at hand. It is provisional because unlike fictional mysteries, we never come to the complete solution when speaking of our relationship with God. There is always more to be discovered, experienced and integrated into our personal theology. I would remind you that theology is nothing more than the way we speak of what we have concluded about God and about our connection with God. I think often of a dear friend who in talking about what she knew of God and of faith would preface any statement with “According to the light I have now....” According to the light I have now. It is good to remind ourselves that we never in this life will have all of the possible light in our quest to deepen our relationship with God.

All of this brings us to the great mystery in our lives, the mystery we call faith. It is the mystery which human beings have lived within since creation began. We come to the journey of faith when we as individuals recognize and acknowledge that we are not the final authority in the world. That is one clue in the mystery. There is a God, unseen but not unexperienced, a God who knows us and is capable of being known by us. That we can know God is a second important clue in the mystery of faith.

This mystery of faith seems to be full of questions. What is the relationship between law and grace, rebellion and obedience, death and eternal life, cross and redemption, sin and forgiveness. For example, if we are saved by grace, how important are the commandments? Or, can we sin without fear of consequences because we know God will forgive us? Each of us must grapple with these issues and many more throughout our life. They are the questions that have been central through the centuries to the human effort to understand and be faithful to God. How we resolve these seeming contradictions for ourselves becomes our own personal theology. We all have one, even if we do not name it such. We come to it as we search for clues that identify who God is for us. Sometimes we may take wrong turns, upsetting the balance between the gift of free will God has given us and the boundaries God has constructed. Free will allows us to make our search personal and meaningful to us. The boundaries show us the possibilities offered to us as we strive to live a God centered life.

Thinking about the paths that others have taken, the history of faith over the centuries can help us see our own theology more clearly. Beginning with Adam and Eve, in the Garden, human beings struggled with faith and the search for meaning in their lives.

Abraham had faith in the promise of God and it was “reckoned to him as righteousness”. Abraham’s faith led him to follow where God led even if at time it was fear and hesitation. But follow Abraham did. The first step in a personal theology of faith is to be willing to follow where God leads. Following is difficult at times for the ancestors in the faith and for us. Abraham questioned, doubted and even debated with God. On occasion Abraham’s faith was not strong enough to trust implicitly and so he went astray. But there was always a path back. When we go astray, there is always a path back for us as well. Acknowledging that we need forgiveness and that God is willing to forgive, is the third clue to the mystery of faith.

Over time the relationship of faith between God and human beings came to be more clearly understood. In Judaism faith came to mean trust in God and belief in God’s words, especially those words of promise. Believing God became the fabric of trust, hope, fear and obedience. This faith was grounded in God’s past actions, in rescuing Israel from Egypt, guiding them through the desert and bringing them to the land of Promise. Israel came to see faith in the present time as obedience to the commandments they had been given in the desert. The experiences of the ancestors in the past and the present life lived within the structure of the commandments led faith for Israel to have confidence that in the future God will continue to do what God had promised.

With the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the exile of the people, faith became even more strongly associated with obedience to the law of Moses and to the Torah. Obedience to that law gave structure to life in exile and gave the promise and hope of a way back. They became the way in which the Jews of the Dispersion could be linked with God who had not abandoned them. Perfect obedience came to be seen as the way that God would redeem God’s people.

The earliest Christians were Jews who brought with them the whole history of the development of faith. In working out how faith was both the same and different, Christians began to speak of faith *in* God. The way they saw their relationship with God and especially with the risen Christ entailed reliance, trust and most especially belief. For Christians belief was not an intellectual assent to a doctrine, but rather that to which you gave your heart. To believe for these Jewish Christians and later for their gentile converts came to mean the action of turning to God and accepting a relationship with God. Faith began to be personal rather than communal. It means a personal acceptance of the words of Jesus, a recognition of Jesus as the long expected Messiah.

One of the most famous converts to Christian was Paul of Tarsus. Paul preached his personal theology and faith to the people who gathered where ever he went. His theology meant the acceptance of the words of Jesus but it also meant a change in the person of faith. While Pauline faith had all of the elements of the earlier faith of Israel, believing, obeying, trusting, and hoping now faith meant living differently. In the words of the letter of James, Christians were and are called to be doers of the word not hearers only.

What does it mean to believe? What is it you give your heart to? In what do you have faith and how is it expressed in your daily life? If you were asked to speak of your theology, what would you say?