

Arvada
United Methodist Church

November 8, 2009

Deeper the Mystery
Job 30

Rev. Rusty Butler

Were you here last week? What a glorious service we had. The music was superb...Carolyn played this powerful Toccata and Fugue in D Minor by Bach on the organ, it was remarkable. Then during the Children's time, the children told about how they spent a dollar that the congregation had given them the week before, some of them gave their dollar to UNICEF, and others to a homeless person on the street and others to the church. I counted 43 children with Valerie during the children's sermon time. Then Brad and Cindy Pierson told us about their giving journey for stewardship. We had the reading of the names of the saints...who had died in this past year.

Valerie then spoke to us about the importance of Stewardship and how we care for the things of God and through our care...we become more of the people who we are meant to become. And finally we shared in Communion and dropped our pledge cards into a basket.

It was a memorable day, the chairs and pews in both services filled. We had almost 500 people here. It was just a day of great worship...and even if it went 25 minutes long, as people came out into the narthex, there seemed to be no grumbling about the length of the service because everyone knew they could still get home and watch the start of the Bronco's game. And besides, what else would the saints of the church in this congregation do but behave saintly on All Saints day? And the game, as we know, wasn't worth watching anyway. Worship was way better than the Bronco's game.

And so the question is, after a day like that, "How do you follow something like that up?" How do you keep it going? That spirit. That feeling.

Of course, next week, we have Dr. Robin Meyers, a nationally recognized figure coming to preach both services and do a workshop with us on Sunday night. I hope you will invite your friends to come with you to one of the services or to the workshop. It is going to be memorable.

This week I asked people in the Tuesday evening class and the Wednesday Brown Bag which book they had read had changed the way they look at religion and life and it was so interesting. But what really impressed me was that a handful of people said that Dr. Meyer's book, *Saving Jesus from the Church*, had really changed their view of religion over the last few weeks!

So here we are on a week sandwiched between what was (which was excellent) and what will be (which we await with great anticipation) and then well we have this week, this Sunday and Rusty's preaching. Oh my...well you know, ho-hum!

Well hopefully, today is not just ho-hum!

Would you pray with me?

O God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts lead us further into the mystery. Amen.

In Dr. Meyer's book, *Saving Jesus from the Church*, there is a section where he laments about us and our desire for safety and our addiction to easy answers, about how we want "the Bible to give us simple answers, not richly textured metaphors, songs, poetry, prayers, dreams, and

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maddening parables-but marching orders.” And he says, “Just as we want a blue pill to make us think and a red one to make us happy, we want church to clear up the Mystery, not deepen it.” I have been pondering that phrase, about how we want church to clear up the mystery and not deepen it.

Perhaps it’s not just us who want the easy answers, who want things wrapped up, simply and logically. Who need ready explanations for things like the shooting at Ft. Hood. It’s not just us, maybe it is the way it has always been. The Scriptures themselves testify to it.

The book of Job is one of the most perplexing in the Bible. G. K. Chesterton said, “The Iliad is great because all of life is a battle, the Odyssey is great because all of life is a journey; the Book of Job is great because all of life is a riddle.” And the riddle is why a Good God would do that to a good person.

In the book of Job, God and Ha-satan, which means “the prosecutor”, decide to test Job to see if he will remain faithful. Job is struck down on every side, his wealth is taken away, his health is ruined, his family killed, he is driven down into the valley of despair and loss and grief. And he cannot figure out why. His friends try to explain it, but their explanations fall short, his wife tells Job to curse God, but he won’t. But still he cannot figure out why do these things happen to him? Isn’t God supposed to be the protector of the good and just and true?

The answers come...not very good answers from God in my opinion, basically, I do these things to you because I can. At the end of the book, many scholars believe another writer has pasted on an addendum, a little piece of story about what happens to Job, that he becomes healthy, and wealthy, and has more children. And he lives happily ever after.

It’s not the only place in the Bible where another writer adds something to the text to make it more palatable. Something similar happens at the end of the gospel of Mark. The original writer ends the book after Jesus crucifixion and three women go to the tomb, and there is a messenger who tells them, “Go tell Jesus’ disciples and Peter that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee.” So the ladies went out and fled from the empty tomb, and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.

That’s the way that story ends. But people just couldn’t let it be, so some other writers added two more endings to the story. Take away the ambiguity, make it simpler, nicer. Wrap it up in a bow. But life isn’t like that, we know that.

A couple of weeks ago a young woman who’s been coming to the church off and on for the last few months came to interview me as part of her college class assignment. She wanted to talk to me about evil, about the existence of evil and the idea of a Good God. I thought to myself, “Why me? You should talk to Valerie about those things - she has a philosophy degree from Oklahoma State!” And so I struggled to answer her questions.

I don’t know if I have any good answer to those questions. It is a mystery.

I do know this, one of the truly moving moments of last week’s worship was when we asked people to share the names of the friends and family members who had died in the past year. The names kept coming and I was struck by the weight of all the sadness, loss and pain that we carry day by day.

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Sister Joan Chittister said this about pain, "There is no one who can take the pain away because the pain cannot be taken away. There is no one there to ease it because it simply cannot be eased." And what can possibly be the gift of such a state. Chittister says that it is the call out of isolation into independence. It is the grace of discovering that our lives are more than any one event and that we, not fate, are really what will determine what the rest of our lives will be like. What we struggle against, what we struggle for, what with we struggle with will test and hone us.

Yesterday at the church conference I shared that so far we have around 300 pledges. For a total of 530 thousand dollars. Now if you have been around here for even a little while you know that there is no way we are going to be able to keep going like we have been on that amount. I do not know what the stewardship drive will turn up in the end. It may be significantly less than what we've had pledged before. I know we have about 55 brand new pledges, but I do not know what the final total will be. But I know this. We will find a way to make it. We will do what needs to be done and we'll continue to be in mission and ministry because that's who we are.

The struggle will test us and it will hone us. And we will be better for it in the end. The great choice is not whether to accept the struggle, the pain that will come in life. But the choice will always be whether to crumble under it or to lean into it.

Near the end of *Farewell to Arms*, Hemingway wrote, "The world breaks everyone, and then some become strong in the broken places."