



Sermons **from Northwood United Church**

**“The veil lifts on the mystery”
2Kings 2:1-12, Mark 9:2-9**

Will Sparks February 19, 2012

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

It was a sweltering dry blazing day in August on the sight of the Salmon Arm Roots and Blues Festival (there! I got the plug in early. Best show in western Canada. Tickets available, yadda yadda yadda). It was a sweltering dry blazing day in August on the Shade stage for an Afro-beat concert led by the Mighty Popo from Ruanda. And this concert brought together several different musicians from different bands all from the African traditions. So there were drums and whistles and guitars and shakers and all kinds of stuff on stage and it was ready to rock. Unfortunately Ruthie Foster had not made it on stage yet, but she was on her way. The concert got going and it was pretty mild. Great players, but something missing. Some intangible quality of chemistry had not yet gelled.

Then Ruthie Foster came on stage, they gave her a mic, and she began to sing. Well, the rhythm kicked in from behind. Popo started filling in from the side on his guitar, another guitar came in, and the place took off. At the end of that piece, Popo smiled, turned to Ruthie and said, “You know my mother always told me to respect women because they carry in them the mystery of life.”

The mystery of life. The mystery of that chemistry, that transforming alchemy. I dare say Jesus knew something about that mystery. Oh it didn’t just happen in the magical mystical way. It happened, at the wedding in Cana, where the water became wine and the party that was headed for a slow and painful death was brought back to life. It happened in that story, a favourite of mine of the woman caught in adultery and those who were about to stone her, when he stepped in to the midst of them, waded into the conflict, looked them in the eye, then looked at the ground, and then I imagine him looking off in the distance and then back to them as he said, “let those who are without sin, cast the first stone.” And then he looks back to the ground offering them another moment within themselves each to decide if they would stand for judgment and death, or grace and life. I think he knew something about that mystery of life.

I am sure the disciples could see it. I am quite sure that that is what drew them to him. I am also pretty sure they didn’t know what it was, but they are drawn to him, and see the mystery of life and joy, healing and hope unfold all around him as they witnessed and indeed unfold within them as they were with him- kind of rub off.

And then just before the story of the transfiguration that we heard this morning, Jesus has told them that following him around is not enough, that engaging this mystery at the core of life can be a dangerous path, involving great suffering, rejection, and in his case, death, and ultimately resurrection. “...he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly.” And they rebel. “What do you mean, suffering and death? You are supposed to be the one who can make all things right- fix everything- take away the pain. This can’t be right. This mystery that transforms can’t involve such pain.” And there is a jolt of fear that whistles through them. “No! It can’t be!”

So he then leads them up a mountain. And on that mountain the veil that makes it so hard for them to comprehend the mystery at the core of life, that mystery that is at work all around

them all the time but they don't understand it, that veil is lifted. And they see these long gone prophets, Moses, Elijah, communing with Jesus. The veil between the living and the dead is lifted, the membrane making it hard for us to access heaven here and now dissolves. Heaven is closer than you think. They catch a glimpse of the mystery that is at hand. It is not just Jesus, it is also Moses, and Elijah, and by extension, in might also be them.

It's the same with Elijah and Elisha. The poor guy. Elisha. When I read that story I hear grief all over the place. He is afraid of losing the one person he knows is truly in touch with spirit, and he can't let him go. And finally, when the story narrows down to just the two of them, Elijah asks, "so what is it that you want. You know I'm leaving you and there's nothing you can do about that. So what is it that you want?" And then we really hear it, "A double portion of whatever it is that you have- that spirit- that mystery- that alchemy- that life." You see. He is afraid that Elijah represents his only connection with the mystery.

Elijah knows that his work on earth is done. He knows that his time to leave this life has come. He is planning to take a walk in the wilderness alone and never come back, and he is at peace with that. But his beloved apprentice, Elisha, can't let that happen, because he believes that if Elijah's not there, God, the holy mystery, will be gone.

It has been said, "The truth will set you free, but first it will drive you crazy." The mysterious truth at the core of life was there before them on that mountain top, but before it set them free it drove them crazy, they tried making tents for the Spirit, in a myriad of ways they didn't get it, and at Jesus death they were crazy with grief before they could be set free when the veil lifted again at the resurrection.

We have these experiences of holy mystery, these mountain top experiences in our lives. We also have mountain top people, the Ruthie Fosters of our lives, the Dalai Lama encounters, these people who seem to have an extra portion of Spirit in them. And we bask in these encounters. They lift the veil on the mystery for us for a moment. These are wonderful moments, wonderful encounters, wonderful people. And like the disciples, like Elisha, we can cling to these moments, cling to these people, because we are afraid that that is all of God we are going to get. We end up living as if God is confined to those moments and those people.

But God does not just live on the mountain tops, and in the gurus. God lives in the valleys and in the everyday. The mystery is in the beauty and the suffering. The transforming power of love and healing is not just in Jesus' hands but in yours and mine. The task of faithfulness as followers of Jesus is to not simply admire Jesus, but to take up our cross, pick up the mantle, and live the mystery, sing the song that is in your heart, let your life unveil the mystery.

Amen