

Covenant Word

It's a Mystery to Me!

Genesis 1:1-2:4a; II Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28:16-20

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
Jackson Shelton
Pastor
Sunday
May 18, 2008*

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting
to read and study these
thoughts more
carefully. Please know
that I do not take full
credit for anything that
may be contained
within, because I may
have read or heard
something at some point
during my pilgrimage
and do not remember
its source and thus,
cannot give the rightful
author his/her credit. I
pray that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.
Sarah Shelton**

We recently re-organized our garage. I started a pile of coolers, ice chests, and those shiny keep cool bags. As the collection grew, Dan asked why we had so many. I explained that one was used for drinks to the ball field, one for bringing groceries home in the hot summer, and one was for when we bring shrimp back from the beach. With all seriousness, he looked at me and said, "I don't understand why we go to such trouble to keep the shrimp iced down. Don't we just bring them home and throw them into boiling water?" I pondered his question as I thought about the eggs, butter, and milk I try to keep cool on the way home from the grocery store...only to mix them together a few hours later and cook them in a hot oven. These things are a mystery to me.

I'm sure that a physicist or chemist could offer explanations, but they would need to be careful in how they did it. For instance: When we renovated our home, we were out of it for an entire year. Then, after finally moving in, we found that the various sub-contractors were still with us. The transition was slow in coming as to: was this house ours or still theirs? I did pretty well while we were out of the house. I was determined not be one of "those women" who interfered, griped and complained, constantly changed work orders, or would dissolve into tears when things didn't quite go as expected. But once we were back living in the house, I found that just the appearance of these workers in my driveway could push every one of my buttons.

On one particular day, the plumber was back, again, to fix, again, an ongoing issue in the crawl space. He had an uncanny knack for speaking down to me. Any words out of his mouth carried the attitude of "you're a stupid girl," even though he was the one returning to make a repair for the third time!

When it got quiet down below, I met him at the back door. He began an explanation that might as well have been in a foreign language as far as I was concerned. I finally stopped him and asked for a lay person's explanation. That was when it started. As he loomed over me with that attitude of "you stupid girl," I snapped. I stamped my foot, drew myself up to my fullest height and put my finger in his face. I said, "I may not know one thing about plumbing, but let me tell you, I am smart about some things!" Stunned at my response, he stepped back and said, "I'm sure you are." He got in his pick-up truck, and to our astonishment, we never saw him again!

Now I am confident that I could read a copy of Plumbing for Dummies and be completely informed and enlightened. But the truth of the matter is that this is knowledge that I neither want nor need. I'd rather the plumbing at my house remain a mystery. The same is true regarding a thermos. How does the same material keep cold things cold and hot things hot? Or a fax, how can the information that I run through the machine in our office suddenly appear in its entirety in your office? It's a mystery for which I neither need nor desire an explanation.

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My freshman biology class at the University of Alabama included a series of lectures about how the world was created. Not strictly bound to the

accounts in Genesis, I found that I had room for these scientific theories about the beginning of the world. However, the professor presented the information in such a way that he allowed for a primal mover in each proposal. By doing so, he left creation open for mystery, wonder and awe; so that I could gratefully join the Creator in pronouncing "it is good."

I am just naïve enough to be a proponent of mystery. I like for the presents to sit under the Christmas tree so that they invoke wonder about their contents and even who might have placed them there.

I enjoy the sensation that comes from studying all week, experiencing the panic of late Wednesday night when I feel like I have nothing with which to construct a sermon and then, by some mystery, when I sit down to compose the sermon on Thursday and Friday, words flow from the pen in



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my hand.

When I die, I know that those who practice medicine will want to know my oxygen levels, the respiration rate and a host of other pertinent facts. However, my hope is that my family will not have to be concerned

about these things. Instead, my desire is for them to enter into my experience of passing from one world to the next as one of the greatest mysteries of all.

I prefer to watch the waves at the beach and be lost in mystery rather than to consider gravitational pull and the directions of winds and currents. I would rather lose myself in the colors of a sunset...the innocence of a newborn...the playfulness of a puppy...the glory of magnificent music...the blooming of flowers in my yard...and the expression of complete acceptance and forgiving grace on a loved one's face.

At those moments, I do not need or want an explanation. I want to experience the mystery of it, or as the choir sang about it, to be overcome by the majesty and glory of God.

Now in the liturgical year, today is Trinity Sunday. This is the only day of the Christian year that is set apart to ponder a teaching of the church rather than a teaching of Jesus. The scripture passages, read earlier are carefully chosen to reflect this Three-in-One doctrine: God as Creator, Christ as Redeemer, and Holy Spirit as Sustainer.

Although this mystery of God revealed in three ways is a core belief of Christianity, many struggle to explain it. Monotheistic Christians do back flips explaining why such a belief does not make us polytheists. Water has often been called forth as a witness. This common earthly element exists as a gas, a liquid, and a solid. Three forms, one substance, get it? (Mary Anderson, "So Explain It To Me," www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=587)

Some have chosen a favorite member of the Trinity and have put all of their theological eggs in this one basket. Some, concerned that the Trinity expressed as "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," portrays the Godhead as overly male, have worked to change the language to something like God Unbegotten, God Incarnate, and God Among Us. Some opt to ignore the Father-Son-Spirit relationship completely and speak only of the functions of the three: Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Others are outraged that we would so casually tinker with the ancient language of faith and insist that we continue with the traditional Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (Anderson)

It is important, I think, to understand that these experiments in verbiage are the attempts of ordinary men and women, from the experiences of their own lives, to make sense of and respond to God's activity in the world, the event of Jesus Christ, and the presence of Holy Spirit. It is our way of talking about God and the ways in which God is made known to us.

One of the greatest theologians in all of history, St. Augustine, came to the conclusion that human beings are not capable of fully understanding the mystery of the Trinity. The story surrounding his decision goes something like this: after spending many sleepless nights trying to comprehend the mystery of the Trinity, St. Augustine was walking along the sea in an effort to clear his mind. He came upon a young boy playing on the beach. The boy had dug a hole in the sand, and

was attempting, with a spoon, to fill the hole with water. After watching the boy for a few minutes, St. Augustine asked, "Young man, what is it you are trying to accomplish?" The boy looked up and responded, "I'm going to fill this hole with

water." St. Augustine laughingly said, "That is an impossible task." The boy stopped,

looked the saint straight in the eye, and replied, "I have a far better chance of emptying the oceans of the world into this tiny hole, than you have of completely understanding the mystery of the Holy Trinity." According to the legend, the boy then vanished, leaving St. Augustine alone on the beach. This great theologian believed that he had been visited by an angel, and realized that he had reached the limits of his comprehension of God. (Tracey Lind, "The Trinity of Love," [Interrupted by God: Glimpses from the Edge](#))

Now I would consider signing a petition that says we will just leave this Trinity stuff in the realm of mystery with no attempt to give it logical explanation. The truth is, however, that as believers, at one time or another, we will be approached by someone, and in a serendipitous moment, be asked, "I understand that you are a Christian. Can you explain it to me?" While we might shrug our shoulders and simply say, "It's a mystery to me!" I would not advise it. What I would encourage us to do is to invite the seeker to enter into mystery with us.

There are a couple of ways to do this.

One option is to have a variety of scriptures that you can talk about and explain to the individual. Growing up a Southern Baptist, I always believed this was the best way to give a witness to another person. My Bibles were marked and highlighted so that I could seamlessly move a seeker from point A to point B without so much as a stutter in my speech or methodology.

This was fine until I was paired with Mr. John Pittman in an Evangelism Explosion class at Brookwood Baptist. Mr. Pittman is a great man of faith. He is a well-known Christian businessman in Birmingham, a trustee of Samford University, and the man from whom we purchased our original building, if I have my history right. I suspect I was paired with him to be sure that I had not been introduced to too many heretical ideas at Southern Seminary. Being a recent graduate at the time, I did not disappoint the assumption.

The night came that we were to discuss the Baptist tenet regarding "once saved, always saved." While Mr. Pittman was busy explaining to me why he held firmly to this belief, I casually asked that if we have the free will to choose to believe, do we not also have the free will to dis-believe? He checked the index, the concordance, and the table of contents of our materials. Without "evidence" to put before me, he finally said that he just believed it. I was comfortable allowing him to live with that mystery, but apparently he was uncomfortable living with mine. I had a new partner the very next week!

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Now I believe that in every circumstance of life, you can learn something: either how to do it or how not to. That night in Evangelism Explosion class, I learned that to force an agenda or a set formula or a procedure above the person seeking answers about faith just simply does not work. To talk about who God is and how you have personally experienced the love of Christ and the times that the Spirit has encouraged you, should be as unique as you are. To speak of these things cannot be done in cookie cutter fashion, but rather, to speak of the things of faith, we must allow for the fluid nature of relationships that allow for the individual expressions of personality and experience.

This is after all the essence of the Trinity. God-Christ-Spirit all in fluid motion...in relationship with one another and desiring relationship with each of us.

We read the first chapters of Genesis and there is Spirit blowing across the waters. There is Creator God speaking oceans and continents and creatures of the sea and land into being with only a word. The Word that John's gospel later tells us was made flesh in Jesus Christ. The pinnacle of God's activity comes with the creation of humans. The breath of God fills us with Spirit making us in the image of the Divine, for what purpose? ...to be in relationship. It is one of Scripture's dearest revelations that we have been created in the image of God. And this whole idea of the Trinity vastly deepens our concept of what it means to bear this image. For if God is seen as a zestful, loving, fluid community, it opens up whole new vistas as to what being like God may entail. (Scott Hoezee, "Trinity Sunday, Year A," pg. 3, The Lectionary Commentary: Old Testament and Acts, Van Harn, ed.)

I can honestly say that I have never been a part of a community of faith who understood and lived this concept of Trinity as relationship until I came to Baptist Church of the Covenant. Granted, we may not know some things, but about this we are really, really smart! Fearing that you may have heard me say it too often, today, with permission, I offer you the words of one of our own members. Struggling to make faith their own, this member wrote this week to express appreciation for the ways this congregation has lived the Trinity to them as relationship. The letter, in part, reads:

Dear Pastor Sarah:

...After coming to Birmingham, *I developed anger towards God, Christians, the Church, and most of all, the Baptists. This anger melded into apathy and, ultimately, atheism. ...I am sure you noticed, I stopped attending on a regular basis. I always felt guilty about that...because I knew that I was willingly walking away from true kindness.*

It has, however, become more and more obvious to me that the members of BCOC truly care about me. Although I have not been to church in about a year and a half, I still receive notes of encouragement, invitations to events, and even hospital visits. I often feel like I am at the receiving end of a one-way friendship. For that I am sorry. But I know, at the same time, that you expect no apology. You and the members of the church you lead have shown me truly unselfish love and kindness, never expecting a

thing in return. For that I am grateful.

...When I am not there, I miss the uncanny knack that the choir has for making the hairs on my arm stand on end, I miss the warmth of the people who always remember my name, and I miss the comforting poetics and insightfulness of your words. ...the kindness does make a difference.

...Through discussion with my friends and the actions of the people at BCOC, I have gained a greater understanding of what Christianity truly looks like. ...while my perception of "Christians" might not ever completely heal, my thoughts on Christianity might. ...Although I know it will take some time, I have started to try again.

So thank you. Thank you for showing me what can be done. Thank you for helping me understand that Christianity is not just a mystical playground for the weak minded. If it is true that God is love...Thank you for showing me the purest form of God I have ever seen.

Hands and feet, heart and mind, body and spirit...

The celebration of another as a child of God's...

The dance of grace, forgiveness and acceptance...

No explanations! No scientific theory! No dogmatic formula!

Just an invitation to join us in mystery...a relationship that when God sees it, gives us a blessing by pronouncing: "And it is good. It is very, very good." Amen.

This is after all the essence of the Trinity. God-Christ-Spirit all in fluid motion...in relationship with one another and desiring relationship with each of us.