

In his first inaugural address George Washington referred to the new nation he'd come to lead as, "the last great experiment for promoting human happiness." In that address he framed the whole thing as a new model of government whose destiny was, as he put it, "staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people."

Whether it would succeed or not remained a mystery. Some might say it *still* remains a mystery... that the experiment is still playing out. That it always *will be*.

Similar to how the story of God and God's people continues to play out generation over generation, far beyond the pages of scripture. To be human there's a certain level of mystery that you just simply have to live with... whether you like that or not.

I'll never forget that one of the first things that drew me to the United Church of Christ when my mom first went to seminary was that the churches I suddenly found myself in were not only OK with mystery... they seemed to *relish it*. That mystery in faith was a *feature* and not a bug in the system. To

that point in the mainly conservative
fundamentalist evangelical circles I'd grown in there
was no room for mystery. Scripture was true. It was
certain. If you didn't understand it that was because
you hadn't dug deeply enough into your faith.

But our sacred stories, our contemporary
stories, the stories our very lives... they're all
steeped in mystery. Strangers arrive at just the right
moment. Simple conversations change the course
of entire lives. Healing comes in the midst of
despair, impossible as it may seem. Love appears
where fear had previously taken up residence. Even

if we can't always *explain* those moments; we *know* them, and we know them as *sacred* when we see them.

Genesis 24 is filled with those kinds of moments. The whole thing is a lesson in mystery, and how mystery is actually the foundation for faith – not certainty.

Before we get to the central action of this text for today, though, it's important to think about the incredible faith in mystery that took place before we even *reached* this part of the story. Abraham has sent his servant out to the land of his fathers to find

Isaac a wife. So this servant will head north, *out of Canaan*, traveling *hundreds* of miles – to a land Abraham hasn't inhabited for *decades*. To find a needle in a hay stack – the *perfect* wife for Isaac.

Not *only* that, though – Abraham is sending this servant with *only* those instructions and tells him to carry along a set of very valuable bracelets and a ring; to signify whose house the servant represented. So now he's making this long and treacherous trip with *incredibly valuable property* – items that would have likely cost tens of thousands of dollars in today's currency – items that he has to

keep safe. And not only *THAT*... but Abraham is sending him with camels to carry his supplies, and possibly the servant himself. Contrary to popular culture's depictions, not everyone in the ancient middle east had camels. They were novel, a sign of prestige. Almost like driving around in a Ferarri.

There's *a lot* riding on this servant's mission and there's *a lot* that can go wrong. There's a lot to lose.

And yet, like his master Abraham who went when God called so many years before – the servant goes on faith. Following a *mystery*.

In our selection for today we learn that the servant has made it to the land of Abraham's fathers and now he's on the part of his quest where he has to actually *find* the person he's looking for. So he does something we've seen depicted in so many stories throughout time.

He asks for a sign. He asks for a nod from the mysterious so that he might be made able to see what he needs to see. He prays and says that he'll ask the first woman who comes to fill her jar if she'll draw some water for him – and if she responds by

saying yes *and* by offering to draw water for his camels that's how he'll know.

And in walks Rebekah.

She runs home and tells her brother about this servant she's met, and the expensive jewelry he's given her, and they invite the servant into their home where he shares his mission with them.

There's bartering and negotiating over what the family would need in return for taking Rebekah back to Canaan to be Isaac's wife – and if we focused only on those things it would be just another story of patriarchy exerting itself in the

ancient world – which, to be clear, it *is*... but there's a caveat here.

Rebekah has a chance, herself, to embrace the mystery. To hold faith in the mystery and to go forth following it. Because after all of the bartering and details have been done she's asked, "Will you go with this man?"

And she says yes. She *chooses* the mystery that's in front of her. A mystery that leads *back* over those many hundreds of miles, riding on less than conspicuous camels, wearing expensive gold rings and bracelets... all to find Isaac in his field where

we're told he and Rebekah come to love one another and find comfort in one another.

Throughout this story everyone is trying to discern something they can't fully know. The servant goes with his limited instructions and then he prays and watches. Rebekah decides to go while her family lets go so that she can do so. Isaac waits, we can assume a long while, until the servant can return.

None of it is certain.

All any of them has to go on are signs, relationships, hope in God's provision and promises,

trust that they're making the best decisions they can. They're not following a clearly marked path with neon lights pointing out where to go... they're *discerning* all along.

If you're like me it's easy to wish sometimes that God would just give detailed, word for word, instructions with a map all while pointing us in the right direction from the start... but we all know from experience that isn't how it works. Instead we see glimpses, or doors open unexpectedly, or someone in our community says they see gifts in us that we hadn't seen ourselves. Or sometimes we have an

ache, or a longing, in our hearts that refuses to disappear until we start going in an unexpected way; or down a road that we'd always been told is closed to us. We find ourselves walking in faith, not because everything is clear but because something deeper, something unexplainable, keeps inviting us onward.

The ancient church called them mysteries not because they were puzzles that needed to be solved, but because our forebears in faith recognized there were realities too vast and too deep to exhaust all of their meaning. Realities we

could never fully get to the bottom of. Like communion, as we'll share today.

We call communion a mystery – not because we suspend our intellect in saying the bread and the cup are changed. We call it a mystery because no explanation can fully capture what happens when ordinary bread and cup become a place where strangers become family, when ordinary bread and cup become the tangible manifestations of love and grace, when *we are changed* by humbly receiving such simple elements. You don't have to suspend reason to accept sacred mysteries, because sacred

mysteries are what remain after reason has done its faithful work.

The poet and theologian Howard Thurman once suggested that there is something within every person that waits, listens, and reaches toward the eternal. We know facts. We gather evidence. We think critically. But there is also something within us that recognizes beauty before beauty can be defined. There's something in us that recognizes justice before justice can be legislated. There's something in us that recognizes love before it can be explained as love.

That's the part that lives in mystery.

In a world that's driven more and more by algorithms and artificial intelligence that sense of wonder *has to* remain. It has to because not only is it the thing that led the servant to Rebekah, and Rebekah to Isaac, but it's what has driven the most important movements for justice in our human history. Because that wonder, that embrace of mystery, is what has enabled people through generations to pursue what is just and what is right – even if all the empirical evidence showed it should be impossible.

Abolition, women's suffrage, the civil rights movement, marriage equality – each began because people believed another world was possible long before the society around them agreed. And in each there was no guarantee for success.

There was only hope. A hopeful embrace of the mysterious ways God can show up. Mystery is an integral part of our individual, and our communal, lives of faith.

The great mystery of our faith is not that God hides from us, or that God is waiting for us to find God through very specific readings of some obscure

texts. The great mystery is that God keeps meeting us – in strangers, in journeys, in shared meals, in unexpected friendships, in difficult conversations, in justice movements, in acts of compassion, and in the moments when we recognize that grace has been walking beside us all along.

It's the trust that God is always doing more than we can perceive, that the Spirit is always moving beyond our expectations... that love is always larger than our imaginations. Amen.