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12/24/17--University Presbyterian Church  
Mark 3:7-12; Mark 8:27-30; Mark 9:2-10

NO STARS, NO KINGS, NO ANGEL PROCLAMATIONS:  
CONCEALED REVELATIONS OF THE MESSIAH

Christmas is the season for secrets. I'm talking about the *good* kind of secrets as there are also hurtful secrets and harmful secrets in our lives. Much of our Christmas preparations involve the good kind of secrets where we close doors and in hushed whispers conspire with one or two members of our household about what to get the other people in our household, and then as we hide these gifts away in some dark corner of the house until we then conceal their contents in beautiful gift wrap and lay them beneath the tree for that appointed moment--maybe Christmas Eve or as in our house Christmas morning--when we will tear off the wrappings and the secret will be revealed. And we closely watch the reactions of our loved ones as they unwrap their gift to see if this revelation brings them joy or disappointment. The best Christmas morning reveal in our house was when our children were quite young and we gave them a hamster for Christmas. When they lifted the gift-wrapped box off the cage and saw the hamster, they were completely surprised and totally elated, and they ran circles around the room in utter joy. From a parent's standpoint, it was our most satisfying Christmas morning reveal ever.

The gospel writers of Matthew and Luke also give us very satisfying Christmas revelations in their stories of Jesus' birth. In fact, these stories are so pleasing to us that people of faith have reenacted these revelations down through the centuries in annual church pageants and dramas. In Luke we learn about the heavenly band of angels that appears to the shepherds and announces the birth of the Messiah, telling them where the child can be found. The shepherds go and see this revelation for themselves. It was obviously a positive experience for

we are told, "the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen." In Matthew's gospel, we read about the bright star in the sky which reveals to the wise men where the newborn King of the Jews can be found. The role of the magi in the story is to symbolize the revealing of the good news of the Messiah's birth to the gentile world. In other words, the secret is getting out, being told beyond the Jewish world. The wise men follow this star and finally come to the place where the child can be found. Scripture tells us that the magi "were overwhelmed with joy" upon finding the child.

Matthew and Luke's gospels offer us these "Ta-da! Here is the Messiah" kind of moments, these grand revelations of great joy about Jesus. Mark's gospel, however, Mark's gospel has no birth story. There are no angel proclamations announcing the birth, there are no stars shining brightly in the sky for wise men and others to see and to follow. Revelation about Jesus in Mark's gospel is something altogether different. It's *there* in Mark but in a very unusual way.

What makes revelation in Mark's gospel unusual is the way that Jesus both reveals who he is by the things he does and says, while simultaneously trying to conceal his identity. Even while he is going around healing people, driving out demons from people, performing miraculous actions like feeding the multitudes and calming the stormy sea, he is also trying to keep his identity a secret. He is constantly telling people who know who he is to "hush up." When the unclean spirits correctly identify Jesus as "the Son of God," Jesus orders them to be quiet. When he heals a leper and the deaf man, and raises a little girl from the dead, he tells them all to tell no one what he has done. When he asks his disciples who they think he is and Peter says, "You are the Messiah," Jesus warns them not to tell anyone. This odd practice of trying to keep his identity as the Messiah a secret is referred to by scholars the *messianic secret*. And it

has puzzled scholars and people of faith like us to no end. Why would Jesus keep his identity a secret? Wouldn't God want us to know who Jesus is? Why conceal this important revelation?

You know there are some secrets that are meant to be shared but only at the right time. Our Christmas secrets, for example, are hidden from our loved ones only momentarily with the ultimate intention of their being revealed on Christmas morning. There is evidence that Jesus in Mark intended his secret to be disclosed but only at the right moment. After telling a set of particularly obscure parables, Jesus tells his followers, "For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light." (Mark 4:22) It seems likely that Jesus kept his identity secret from all but a few people because it was not yet the right time to share it. When Jesus had that amazing moment of revelation up on the mountain when he was transfigured before his disciples and appeared with Elijah and Moses and God's voice declared "This is my Son, the Beloved," Jesus later told Peter and James and John to "tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead." There would come a time when that revelation would need to be shared--but not yet.

The reason it was not yet the right time to share this revelation about himself was because for the Jesus of Mark's gospel, no understanding of the Messiah could be complete without the experience of cross. A premature revelation of who he was might encourage a misguided group of people to try to make Jesus into a Messiah of their own creation--a Messiah of political power and might and prestige. But that was not who Jesus would be. Only at the cross would the disciples learn who the Messiah truly was. The big "ta-da! Here is the Messiah" revelatory moment in Mark comes at the cross where they would see a suffering, vulnerable Messiah hanging between two bandits.

Of course, in revealing who *he* was, Jesus was also revealing who *we* his followers are to be. To be a disciple in the example of our Savior, means we are not called to take the road to glory and status but rather the road of love, and the road into other people's suffering and pain, the road of compassion and forgiveness. This is what was revealed at the cross.

It is also possible that Mark's concealing practices throughout his gospel are an effort to hold human arrogance at bay. Revelation without any appreciation for the mystery of God becomes certitude. And certitude in any religious tradition, as we have witnessed throughout human history, leads to intolerance toward others. And it becomes idolatrous toward God. To know with certainty is to possess, and to control, and to manage. And God will not be possessed or controlled or managed. Even in the midst of revelation, God remains a mystery. When Jesus speaks about the Kingdom of God in Mark's gospel, it is as something that is hidden, surprising, and unusual. And Mark poses the challenge: can we see the hidden Kingdom of God in a poor middle eastern man who preached love and died the death of a criminal? Can we see this hidden truth not just about Jesus two thousand years ago, but are we able to see this hidden truth revealed in the suffering people of today? Can we see the realm of God around us, the face of Christ in others, the hidden beauty of God's presence?

Because of this mystery, this concealed nature of God acting in the Messiah, Mark's gospel takes us on a journey of discovery. Little by little the characters in the gospel are shown who Jesus is by the way he loves outcasts, heals the sick, cares about the vulnerable. Little by little we are offered glimpses into Jesus identity as one who serves, who lives humbly, who takes on dark and oppressive forces. Some of the people perceive who he is. Many do not. What about us? Will we see the revelation?

This hidden, concealed quality that Mark presents in his gospel I believe draws us toward God in seeking to know, to understand, to find. And in doing so, we embark on a personal journey of discovery that I believe has far more meaning than if all were revealed to us in giant dump of information. Tim has had the experience of teaching college students in two different ways. One way is they sit in a classroom while he lectures to them. That is the classic form of education. The other way is when students go on seminars with him to places around the globe where they experience the people and subject matters first hand. Guess which form of learning has the greatest impact. Maybe the hidden nature of God functions in a similar way--inviting us on a personal journey of discovery, discovering the Messiah for ourselves.

Two years ago, some friends invited our family to dinner at the beginning of the holiday season. Our hostess had recently discovered at a local thrift store a box containing dozens of little porcelain figurines of children in white sparkling snow buntings. She called them snow babies and she had them displayed around the house. And when we left that evening, she gave us one of the snow babies to take home. I don't recall just how it began, but somehow our family began this game with our snow baby. It involved hiding the snow baby in a place where someone wouldn't expect it to be. They would open up a sock drawer--and there was the snow baby. Or a person would open up the microwave or the refrigerator and discover the snow baby. We hid that snow baby all over the house: in the shower, in someone's pillow case, even in a Christmas gift. When the person discovered the snow baby, it was their turn to hide it somewhere for another surprise discovery. Usually a few days or more would pass between sightings--enough time for us to forget about the snow baby as we went about our regular lives. Until suddenly, there it was where and when we least expected it. We did this game all through Advent that first year and then again for a second Advent a year later. It culminated when Abby

and I conspired to get one of Zach's good natured teachers at school to present the snow baby to Zach in class one day. No one could top that surprise and so we decided to retire the snow baby and turned it into an ornament on our tree.

We tend to embrace revelation and resist concealment. But maybe, maybe the very concealment of God draws us all into a closer relationship with the divine as we enter a kind of lifelong game of discovery. Like the snow baby, where will God be revealed? In the beauty of a symphony? In the curl of a baby's hand on our finger? In the grief of our neighbor? In the suffering of a Puerto Rican family homeless after the hurricane? In the rejection felt by a transgendered person? In the hurt that rises between two friends? Jesus reveals enough about God to teach us that God comes in the unexpected, the unusual, the surprising people and places. He reveals to us that God comes to places of suffering, to people who are rejected, to situations of conflict. That much is revealed. The how this is lived in our own lives is left to us to discover for ourselves.

Not only does Mark not have a birth story but many people feel that Mark's version of the resurrection is not very satisfactory either. In the traditional ending to Mark, the women come to the tomb but do not find the risen Christ. Instead, they are met by an angelic figure who tells them that Jesus is not there but has gone on ahead to Galilee. There they will see him. The women run away in fear and that's where it ends: with a sort-of, kind-of incomplete revelation of the resurrection. We never get to see the risen Jesus in Mark's version. Christ is risen, but remains concealed to us readers. So Mark ends the gospel with this same revelation/concealment paradox. Christ is risen, but it is left up to you and me to discover where and how the risen Christ may be revealed--out there, where he goes ahead of us.