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Are the Mysteries Safe in Here?

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Matthew 9:35-10:16

If you receive the emails that Westminster sends around on Friday mornings you probably know that Tim was planning to preach about “The Imagination of God” this morning. I suppose he was going to lead us into a kind of holy wonder about the inscrutability and immensity of God. I’m going to go a different route this morning, not because I’m critical in any way of the direction I think Tim was headed, but because that’s a sermon he might bring our way on a future Sunday. I’m going to talk instead about whether the church of God – as a whole, all of us, Christians everywhere – whether the church of God is too vulnerable to handle divine mystery. What do we do with the wonders of God? Sometimes the sermons you hear are pieces of preachers’ own attempts to wrestle with the questions that nag them.

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When I was a young child, like between five and eight years old, my family occasionally went to church. The church was named after Saint Matthew – like I am! It was made of stone. They built it strong after the original sanctuary suffered damage in the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Gothic-style. Vaulted ceiling. It seemed to me that this church was the oldest and most mysterious building I'd ever seen. This was suburban California in the 70s, after all, where most of the buildings looked about ten years old. And every thirty years Californians like to tear things down and rebuild them. But this place seemed especially established to me. It looked serious, sound, and confident, built to withstand whatever troubles may come. I saw Saint Matthew's Church as a place that inspired wonder.

Yet for some reason, perhaps because I was a nervous child, I was wary of something inside that building. It was the lights. The sanctuary, which was otherwise pretty dim, was lit by these giant hanging, cylindrical lamps. I know now they're called "pendant lanterns." They were made from iron and glass, and they hung from long chains that stretched way up to the ceiling – twelve of them in all, hovering over the pews.

I was convinced that one day they would fall. And I never wanted to sit beneath any of them. I'd stare at them during services. They looked so heavy. They were impressive. I never saw light fixtures like that anywhere else. They obviously had been there a long time. But no way could those single strands of chain hold them forever. I couldn't help but wonder whether anyone took care of them. Obviously someone dusted the pews, vacuumed the red carpet, and put fresh flowers on the altar. But did anyone ever inspect the chains that held up the massive lights? Each one looked to me like a threat.

I surmised that church was a special place, even a place set apart. I knew enough to know it was a place of mystery – a place that held mysteries. But perhaps because I was a nervous child who was on a path toward growing into a cynical preteen, I also suspected that the church held hidden vulnerabilities. Vulnerabilities and fragilities that no one could see or that no one was tending. I was convinced that one day, because of a weak link or two, one day some structural deficiency would bring an end to the wonder. One of those humongous lights was gonna crush someone.

The church – not church buildings, but the people who gather in the name of Jesus – is a community of wonder.

We speak of a God who defies definition, a peace that surpasses understanding, and our collective access to a slice of eternal wisdom and justice. We encourage each other to imagine that love can transform anything. But what if something makes the church and all its wonder deteriorate? How fragile is this community, after all? What if something goes wrong or someone forgets their job? Or if we stray from the church's purposes?

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When Jesus instructs twelve of his disciples in our biblical text, he doesn't explicitly say anything about the church's internal vulnerabilities. Just external threats. The church's mission seems built to last. The center looks well equipped to hold. That's because Jesus's followers, if they do what they're supposed to do, are engaged in God's work, not their own. Note three things:

- First, Jesus is clear that the ministry that the church will do – exemplified by the twelve ambassadors he commissions – isn't experimental or untested. It resembles and expands Jesus's own ministry: proclaiming the nearness of God's reign, exercising authority over unclean and oppressive spirits, curing ailments, and exposing the ways that human societies

disable their more vulnerable members. Last Sunday Alexandra preached about Jesus calling Peter, James, and John to follow him into living more deeply into the new things God is doing. Now, in this passage, Jesus isn't just sharing his very self with them, he's enlisting them in the cause. Look at the liberation that expands outward from their openness to following after him.

- Second, the ministry that the church will perform finds its roots in Jesus's palpable *compassion*. Jesus sees crowds, and compassion is the immediate response. Not a generic, unfocused compassion; it's compassion for crowds – a population that suffers harassment because it lacks leaders who know their role as shepherds. The crowds have been rendered helpless and exposed. Bad leaders with bad policies and malformed motives have embezzled all the potential; they've stolen all the hope, leaving the crowds with none. The mission that Jesus gives the church is a direct rebuttal to tyranny, greed, and indifference. The mission promises sanctuary and a vision of a new society.
 - I suspect this is where many of us find a door into a deeper imagination about God – not just a

God who is awe-inspiring, but compassionate and hands-on. The same God whom the Presbyterian Scots Confession – which we'll recite later – calls infinite, incomprehensible, and omnipotent also is the source of bottomless compassion – compassion for the crowds, teeming with people whose stories we don't know (and maybe a few whose stories we don't like), and compassion for us. This majestic God notices us and suffers when we suffer.

- Third, the ministry that the church will do will inevitably encounter pushback – much like Jesus's own ministry did. He gives the Twelve warnings, not just instructions. He assures them that they are right, and the people who get in the way are making their bed for judgment. All the church has to do, then, is keep itself sturdy, focused on Jesus, immune to pettiness, and above the fray. And...

Uh oh.

Here we've reached a point when we should glance up and wonder if those chains holding the lights are really strong enough. Do you see how unsafe this is getting?

Now, on one hand, people who read the Bible regularly are used to verses like these, where Jesus warns about people who close their ears to the good news. We know that these kinds of descriptions are sometimes over-the-top, with simplistic divisions between obvious heroes and easy villains.

But on the other hand, those descriptions should provoke us toward soul-searching. And the history of Christianity seconds the motion. Churches don't always do well with interpreting the obstacles or surprises they encounter. Plus, I know many of you carry old, deep wounds from churches and church people who didn't think you belonged.

Can the Christian church carry out its mission without being corrupted by supreme confidence? What happens if the church gets too fond of shaking the dust off its feet and pronouncing judgment on other groups? Who's tending those lamps illuminating the mysteries they talk about at Saint Matthew's Church? What or who is preventing these places we call sanctuaries and the holy imagination they represent from crashing down on the very people they're supposed to be protecting?

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Jesus gives his followers a mission to Jewish villages and towns only. The mission isn't as wide as it's going to get, not yet. But we can understand that – at least at this point in the story. The scope will expand soon enough.

But Jesus also says this:

Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is *worthy*, and stay there until you leave. If the house is *worthy*, let your peace come upon it; but if it's not *worthy*, let your peace return to you.

“If it is *worthy*”?

Many of us have staked our faith and calibrated our imagination on a Jesus who models a way of life that welcomes all people. But here he sounds too much like another leader recruiting partisans for an insular movement.

What would that kind of mission look like in practice? How nice to be able to discern another person's worthiness. How nice to be able to pick up and move to the next town if people don't deserve you and your

gracious presence. How nice to judge so confidently, with such assurance of your own innocence.

That part of the passage may create the impression that Jesus is eager to judge, and that his followers should understand themselves as privileged caretakers of a rather exclusive message. What's happening here? The beginning of this passage anchors the work of the church in Jesus's wide-open compassion. But then, as Jesus commissions his followers to imitate him, the passage gives us reasons to question whether that compassion can hold the weight that pulls on it from the pressure of navigating a world full of threats and disappointments. What's happening here?

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This is a good time to acknowledge that the Bible carries some old wounds, too.

The Bible's purpose isn't just to inspire us or to expand our vision. It can do those things. But the Bible also presents us with stories about God and memories about Jesus that are sometimes disfigured by the hardships that the ancient church suffered. And the fears that clouded its vision.

Matthew's Gospel in particular carries evidence of an ancient church that was eager to keep track of who truly belonged and who did not. The Gospel of Saint Matthew addressed people who wanted to know that they were safe. Or at least that they were right. The Gospel's first audiences were eager to draw lines and wary of being burned. They lived in a context of fierce debates about what true faithfulness looks like when lived out in public. People were desperate to sort out who was – and who wasn't – an authentic believer.

It isn't just a modern problem for Christians to have a tendency toward becoming partisan. Our scriptures show it, too, and preserve it for all time: preoccupation with threat has a way of stifling wonder. And preoccupation with seizing the moral high ground has a way of stifling compassion.

The church should be a sanctuary from threat, but that doesn't mean that life with God is always safe, if by safe we mean immune, or shielded, or unchanging.

Imagination, done right, will foster humility.

Contemplating the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love will open us up. It will keep the lights from failing. It will set us free.

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When I consider this passage from Matthew, something about its focus on swift and certain judgment hits too close to home, at least here in America's current moment, with all of our exposed cultural vulnerabilities, with all of the divisiveness, anger, and feelings of helplessness I hear in too many Christian voices.

Some Christians construct fences of political ideology and cut off access to God's mercy. Other Christians have traded the humility of Christ for nationalism. The more that we rummage through our theological and ecclesiastical basements, the more racism, sexism, and intolerance we discover hiding there. Imagination grows anxious, or predictable. We get weary of waiting for God. Some of us want to take the commission Jesus gives us and rewrite it according to our own values.

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There's an earthiness about Jesus that should keep us from losing our way. By that I mean his attentiveness to people more than abstractions. His interest in feeding people more than dazzling them. In Matthew's Gospel he calls his

followers into a deeper engagement with his mission because first “he saw the crowds.” That’s what initiates everything in our passage. That same phrase – “when he saw the crowds” – occurs in one other place in this Gospel. It’s at the start of chapter 5, when Jesus sees the crowds – probably Jews and gentiles alike, because they come from a wide geographical range – and he offers the Sermon on the Mount. “Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn, the meek, the peacemakers.”

This Messiah of Wonder knows that everything takes its bearing from seeing the crowd. Jesus’s imagination – this energy, this movement, this reality he calls the reign of God – always comes back to situate him among the crowds who are mournful, meek, and merciful. That’s what keeps the lamps where they’re supposed to be, if we never forget that this God of majesty is planted among the forgotten, frayed, and fragile. Jesus himself is among the people who live with a constant awareness that the world itself may come crashing down on their heads – either because of what they lack, or because of what they have suffered, or because of the forces that have targeted them for exploitation or abuse.

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When I occasionally return to where I grew up and drive by that old church, it's so much smaller than what I remember. Less mysterious, but also less scary. I've outgrown my childhood nervousness and most of my preteen cynicism. Now I'm an aging seminary professor who's responsible for teaching people to keep a close eye on the things that are holding churches together.

I haven't gone back inside that church, but I confirmed on Google last night that the lights are still hanging in place. There must be someone who checks on the chains and someone who remembers that Christian imagination is only Christian to the extent that it helps shelter people from the harm that stalks them. As long as a church gathers under the sign of a cross, it has to do the internal work it needs to do to provide sanctuary.

I don't know the people of Saint Matthew's who worship under those heavy lanterns. I'm sure some of them have gotten burned by churches. Chances are good that many of them are anxious about the next election. They might not like what's going on at the church down the street. They probably worry about the world their children are inheriting. Mostly I just hope that all of them pay attention to how Jesus responds whenever he sees a crowd. And that they follow his lead.

Same with me. Same with us.

Amen.