

Sermon for January 3, 2010

The Rev. John A. Baldwin

One of the books I received for Christmas this year is *What the Dog Saw* by Malcolm Gladwell, the author of *The Tipping Point*, *Blink* and *Outliers*. All of the essays in *What the Dog Saw* come from the pages of *The New Yorker* magazine where Gladwell has been a staff writer since 1996. One essay in particular struck me as being rich food for theological thought, especially as we focus this morning on the compelling drama of the visit of the Magi to the Christ child in Bethlehem.

In his essay "*Open Secrets: Enron, Intelligence, and the Perils of Too Much Information*" Gladwell distinguishes a difference between puzzles and mysteries. National Security Analyst Gregory Treverton described Osama bin Laden's whereabouts as a puzzle. We can't find him because we don't have enough information. The problem of what would happen in Iraq after the toppling of Saddam Hussein was, by contrast, a mystery. It wasn't a question that had a simple, factual answer. Mysteries require judgments and the assessment of uncertainty, and the hard part is not that we have too little information, but that we have too much. The CIA had a position on what a post-invasion Iraq would look like. So did the Pentagon, and the State Department, as did every think tank (right wing or left wing), as well as every cabdriver in Baghdad.

If things go wrong with a puzzle, identifying the culprit is easy: it's the person who withheld information. Mysteries, though, are a lot murkier: sometimes the information we've been given is inadequate; sometimes we're not very smart about making sense out of the information we've been given; and sometimes the question itself cannot be answered. Puzzles come to satisfying conclusions, mysteries often do not.

Let's look now at the Nativity stories surrounding the birth of Jesus. What do they tell us about puzzles and mysteries? In Luke's account, the shepherds are puzzle solvers. They experience a vision of angels singing in the heavens. They go to investigate, and find the baby Jesus in the stable. Luke 2:20 says of them, they returned to their flocks "glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard, as it had been told them." Puzzle solved, exit stage left. It's interesting to note the verse just before this (2:19). "But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart." Mary is at peace with mystery. "Who is this beloved child I've borne, and what will become of him." Her heart is left open for the unfolding of events to come.

In Matthew's account, Herod is the puzzle solver. Wise men from the East come inquiring of him, "Where is he who has been born King of the Jews?" Like any good puzzle solver, Herod gathers information. He assembles the chief priests and scribes and asks them what they know, think or believe. He then informs the wise men, and sends them off to Bethlehem. When they don't return, he acts upon the information himself, by ordering the deaths of all the newborn males in that town. Puzzle solved. Case dismissed. The Magi, however, are mystery seekers. They're people who scanned the heavens for insight, guidance and wisdom. They spied an unusual star and went off in search. What could its meaning be? When they reached the house where Jesus was, they offered their gifts, and then departed for their own country by another way. I've always been intrigued

by the Magi. Coming from such a distance for a few brief moments, and then going off again so quickly. I am left pondering: Did they find what they thought they were seeking, or did it simply open up new vistas for wonder and further seeking?

The difference between puzzle and mystery gets played out again and again throughout human experience. Puzzle solvers see things as black or white. There will be a clear-cut answer if, and when, we have all the data. Mystery seekers delve into the gray areas of life, and are less anxious about ambiguity than puzzle solvers. There may be an answer. Then again, there may not. People tend, I believe, toward one way of dealing with the hard questions we face in life, (puzzle solving or mystery seeking) but they clearly overlap in all of us.

Some of the challenges I face often in my ministry are questions seeking answers. Why did this happen to my loved one? Why is there evil in the world? What happens when I die? Is Jesus the only path to God? Am I saved? Why do bad things happen to good people? I wish at times that I were an expert puzzle solver who could clearly and definitively answer those questions without a shade of doubt. But I find that if I am absolutely honest I must resort to mystery. Who truly knows the ways of God?

During the patristic period of the Christian church in the 4th and 5th centuries when the Nicene Creed was developed, the critical question was "Who is Jesus Christ and what is his relationship to God, the creator?" The puzzle solvers were clearly in the driver's seat as the Creed was formulated as a definitive statement. Here it is: One in Three and Three in One, fully God and fully Human. Case closed. The mystery seekers were by and large branded as heretics as they wondered about all the possibilities of this relationship in Jesus between the human and the divine. It was a life and death matter back then, and during the Inquisition. We are not quite so strict about doctrinal purity today, but those like Bishop Spong and others who have challenged the orthodox position are often treated as pariahs. God forbid that preachers or theologians should challenge doctrinal issues settled long ago!!!

Understanding of the Mass, the Eucharist, Holy Communion also brings into play the difference between puzzle and mystery. What happens when the bread and wine are blessed at the altar by a priest? Transubstantiation is a puzzle-solving answer. The bread and wine become the literal, physical body and blood of Jesus. Out of that comes deep concern about how we treat Jesus' body. Don't chew on it for goodness sake! Snatch up every crumb that falls from the table! God forbid we should step on the body of Jesus. The Episcopal Church views the Eucharist as a mystery. We don't pretend to know exactly what happens, but we do believe that it becomes spiritual food to give us spiritual energy for our hearts, minds and souls. It really doesn't matter exactly what happens, but something does happen, and in that mystery there is life, love and healing power.

Our understanding of scripture may likewise fall into a difference between puzzle and mystery. Puzzle solvers affirm that "If the Bible says it, I believe it." Every social and cultural challenge facing us is answered in scripture. The roles of men and women, sexuality, war and peace, morality, political philosophy...are laid out clearly for us by God. It's all black and white. Let's see what scripture says. For those open to mystery, on the other hand, there are various shades of gray and ambiguity in scripture. God is

leading us onward, but the journey to understanding is still an open one. Every generation faces new and unique challenges. How may God be traveling with us through time? How might the guidance offered to past generations differ from that of our own day?

The Episcopal ethos tends more towards openness to mystery than to puzzle solving. As a people of faith we are much more comfortable with ambiguities and shades of gray than are fundamentalists. This can be very frustrating for those who see an openness to inquiry, questioning and re-evaluating as wishy-washy at best, apostasy at worst.

Back for a moment to Gladwell. He references Admiral Bobby Inman, former head of the National Security Agency who was asked several years ago by a congressional commission what changes he thought would strengthen America's intelligence system. His answer: revive the State Department, the one part of the US foreign-policy establishment that isn't considered to be in the intelligence business at all. "In a post cold-War world of openly available information", Inman said, "what you need are observers with language ability, with understanding of the religions, cultures of the countries they're observing." We need fewer spies and more slightly batty geniuses. In other words fewer puzzle solvers, and more delvers into mystery.

Perhaps the same might be said of religion and faith. We need less people looking for certainty, and more who are open to the mystery of a God who loves this human rat race with such intensity that he sent his only Son into the world, to die for us, and to open the path to everlasting life for all people.