

“Holding Onto the Mystery”  
Luke 2:8-19

Some of you probably heard about the Utah mystery of a ten-foot tall metal monolith. Employees of the Department of Public Safety spotted it from the air on November 18<sup>th</sup> while helping wildlife biologists count bighorn sheep from a helicopter. Once news broke, speculation immediately began about who had created the structure and why. Officials did not identify its remote desert location in an effort to discourage others from trying to find it and getting lost. Nonetheless, adventurers soon tracked it down and shared their photos. Here is one.

The final known image is from a man named Ross Bernards who visited the night after Thanksgiving. He had driven six hours and was taking photos with lights attached to a drone when a group of men arrived. They began to push on the structure and soon it fell. They broke it apart and took the pieces away in a wheelbarrow. A friend with Bernards recorded it with his cellphone and on a grainy video you can hear one of the demolition team say, “Leave no trace.”

A newspaper article a few days later spoke to the mystery surrounding the monolith’s appearance and removal. “Artists have been casually speculating that whoever put the sculpture up probably had taken it down once it was discovered...Initially [it] was linked to John McCracken, a California-born artist who died in 2011 and harbored a taste for science fiction. David Zwirner, a New York art dealer who represents the artist’s estate and first identified the monolith as an authentic McCracken, stepped forward [a week after the sculpture was removed to say that] he had studied photographs of it and no longer had any idea who made it. Copycat monolith sightings occurred in the hills of Romania and north of Los Angeles as well.

“All of this leaves us not an iota closer to solving the mystery of who created the Utah sculpture,” the journalists wrote. “On the plus side, the monolith that captivated the country over the past week, then disappeared as quickly as it entered public consciousness, continues to provide a pleasant sensation of uncertainty. Would it lose its aura and power if we knew who had created it?” (Kovaleski, Serge, Deborah Solomon and Zoe Rosenberg, “How a Mysterious Monolith Vanished Overnight (It Wasn’t Aliens),” *The New York Times*, 12/1/20, p. A14)

We gather on a night filled with mystery, too. To be sure, the creator of those events in Bethlehem is clear. We know that God took the dramatic step of assuming human flesh so that the bond with humankind might endure. We know that child was divine power and love on display, yet such knowledge does not lessen the aura of those events one iota.

Added to Biblical insights are our memories of Christmases past. Sitting shoulder-to-shoulder in crowded sanctuaries, our souls being fed by the choir and organ and congregational singing, faces reflecting candlelight and then exiting down a stairwell of others ready to take our seat. We have memories of traveling to see loved ones during this season, of cookie exchanges and caroling, holiday parties and children missing their cue in Christmas pageants. All of those pieces could seem like ancient history tonight for this year’s observance is vastly different.

As many of you have made the difficult choice not to gather with extended family and instead to stay at home. Most gifts had to be mailed ahead of time which means the only way to see the reaction of recipients is online. I am recording this sermon on December 21 in an empty sanctuary and thus for the first time in our married life, Lori and I will be home together for all of Christmas Eve. COVID-19 will make this a Christmas to remember and in some ways one we hope never to repeat again, yet that does not take away from the mystery of Bethlehem.

For no matter how many times we’ve heard the story, it evokes wonder. For what was it like to be one of the shepherds who were minding their own business when an angel appeared

with startling news? What raced through their minds as the night sky was illuminated by heavenly hosts and they set out to see for themselves? What did Mary and Joseph say when that group of strangers showed up and told them of how they had heard of Jesus' birth? We don't know. The narrative doesn't say. Instead, there is mystery and the child's mother encourages it to continue.

For after the quiet had returned to the manger in Bethlehem and it was just the three of them once more, we are told, "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." The one who had been part of events from the beginning clearly did not fully understand it all either. The one who had spoken with an angel and accepted the divine task, the one who celebrated with her kinswoman and shared the unsettling news with her beloved, the one who breathed a sigh of relief when he accepted her account as true and then carried and delivered God's only son, that one ended the first Christmas night pondering its mystery.

That's where we need to be as well. To let those events of long ago stir our imagination and raise new questions. To wonder how it all happened and why God would take such a path to be reconciled to you and me. And not to worry about the things we cannot figure out or feel as if we have to have our questions all answered, but instead to let the wonder of it linger.

An article last month highlighted a challenge that COVID-19 has brought for parents of young children. It wasn't speaking about personal safety or the need for frequent hand-washing. It wasn't the challenge of should the family travel for the holidays or limit their children's interactions with friends or how to work from home while caring for little ones. All of those issues have been part of this pandemic for parents as they have been and remain on the front line.

No, the problem I read about arose from little ones who were concerned how that man in a red suit could do his work tonight. A six-year old in New Zealand named Amy Kidd, knowing that a planned family trip to Ireland would not occur expressed concern to her parents about Santa's efforts. More precisely, she worried that if Rudolph got COVID-19, it would spread to the other reindeer and Santa Claus wouldn't be able to travel. A journalist named Melissa Korn summed up the issue for Amy and other well-informed children: "Given that Mr. Claus is older and overweight, making him particularly vulnerable were he to catch the virus, kids want to know: Does he need to quarantine before traveling? Is he allowed into people's homes? Will he be sporting a mask? And just how much hand sanitizer is appropriate to leave out for him?"

The article was filled with other examples and some words of reassurance. "A 5-year-old boy asked Italy's prime minister, Giuseppe Conte, to provide the paperwork for Santa's travel, as required for people amidst the country's lockdown zones. 'I know that Santa Claus is old and it's dangerous to go into homes,' Tomamaso wrote on Conte's Facebook page, 'but [Santa] is good and for sure he will wear a face mask.' The prime minister assured him Santa [would] receive the needed documentation. Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon declared Santa an essential worker, able to go out for deliveries [even though] much of the country is restricted. [A few weeks ago] John Torres, medical correspondent for the NBC 'Nightly News with Lester Holt,' offered a rundown of recent safety protocols at the North Pole. 'Santa and his helpers are staying in pods, getting tested regularly and will quarantine starting Dec. 10 to be ready for their trip.'" Yet perhaps the most reassuring word of all came from Dr. Anthony Fauci, who told *USA Today* that Santa has an "innate immunity" to the virus. (Korn, Melissa "Dear Santa, Be Sure to Wear a Mask; the Reindeer Too," [www.wsj.com](http://www.wsj.com), November 28, 2020).

Friends, there is much about this night and the events it recalls that we will never be able to explain and that is just fine. For instead of trying to figure it all out or worse, let go of any sense of mystery, we would do well to model our response after the one who was present from the beginning. "But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart."