

What is a mystery?

Pastor Matthew Ude

January 18, 2026

Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory. (1Ti 3:16 ESV)

What is a mystery? A mystery is not merely something which happened and nobody knows who did it, but a really good mystery is when you know exactly what happened but can't figure out how, like the Thomas Crown Affair. A really good mystery is to see the impossible.

So when I tell you that today the mystery is revealed to you, I do not mean that the answer, the how, is given. I do not mean that the explanation is available; if that were true it would not be a mystery. But what is revealed to us is that there is a mystery. That is an event, and a person, which is wonderful, incredible, and completely utterly unexplainable.

In our text today we witness numerous individuals as they encounter that mystery, and as they react to it. Their encounters, what they see and what they say, is of utmost importance to us as we seek not to understand the mystery but simply to know what the mystery is.

John 1:29-42 ²⁹ The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" ³⁰ "This is He of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.'" ³¹ "I did not know Him; but that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water." ³² And John bore witness, saying, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him." ³³ "I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'" ³⁴ "And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God." ³⁵ Again, the next day, John stood with two of his disciples. ³⁶ And looking at Jesus as He walked, he said, "Behold the Lamb of God!" ³⁷ The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸ Then Jesus turned, and seeing them following, said to them, "What do you seek?" They said to Him, "Rabbi " (which is to say, when translated, Teacher), "where are You staying?" ³⁹ He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where He was staying, and remained with Him that day (now it was about the tenth hour). ⁴⁰ One of the two who heard John *speak*, and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. ⁴¹ He first found his own brother Simon, and said to him, "We have found the Messiah " (which is translated, the

Christ). ⁴² And he brought him to Jesus. Now when Jesus looked at him, He said, "You are Simon the son of Jonah. You shall be called Cephas " (which is translated, A Stone).

What did John See?

John saw the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Jesus makes himself the garbage collector of our spiritual filth. He takes away and gets rid of the sin of the world.

This is backwards from all other so-called religions and theologies. In the rest of the world the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life are the goal you must work for. They come at the end if sufficient labor is met. But here in Christ at the beginning before the coming of the disciples comes the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Through Christ the gifts are given before the labor and the work and the journey of the disciples. We do not labor to receive the gifts but receiving the gifts we gladly endure all things rather than losing the gifts.

This promise is what makes Christianity unique among all the religions of the world. In every other faith it is assumed you each must bear your own sin, yet in Christ we are told that God not we carries the weight of our sin.

He is the Lamb of God, that is he is the Lamb whom God has chosen, to be the propitiation for the sins of the world.

This taking away of sins is visualized for us in Jesus' baptism and ours.

Baptism predates Christ, it was certainly used in Judaic rituals, but also in the pagan world. God however, through Jesus, takes a human ritual and fills it with the power of the Holy Spirit, so that which was only a ritual has now become something greater.

What makes our baptism different is Christ himself who baptizes not just with water but with the Holy Spirit. If the Christian baptism were nothing more than one more water ritual of cleansing than it would indeed not be anything special. But through Christ what was merely a human ritual has been sanctified and has become a sacrament.

Baptism is not just plain water. It is water used by God's command and connected with God's word. – Luther

Over the baptism of Jesus and over ours through Jesus, the Spirit hovers as he hovered above the waters during the first day of creation. As the creative power of the Spirit gave life to the earth, so his power also now gives life in baptism. Thus, baptism is often called the 8th day of creation, and many baptismal fonts have 8 sides, in recognition of the fact that although the creation of the world was completed in 7

days, the Spirit continues the work of creation through baptism in the hearts of believers.

Great indeed is the mystery which John witnessed and which we have received in our baptism. That God himself became man so that he could take away our sins, that in the waters of baptism the Spirit by his power and might washes away our sin, so that we might live to God.

What did Jesus See?

Jesus saw Peter, knew him for who he was and made him one of the foundations of the church.

Okay guessing someone's name, before they tell it to you, that is a cheap trick as far as magic goes. I mean if this is the great big miracle that Jesus is supposed to have done, he knew Peter's name, well we could easily find someone better. But the real mystery here is not that Jesus knew his name. It's not even that Jesus knew who Peter was. The real mystery here is that Jesus took this man and molded him into the perfect shape and set him with the other apostles as the foundation to his church.

Jesus knew this man, this was Simon, He knew where he came from, he was the son of Jonah, and Jesus knew where he was going, you will be called Peter. Jesus knew him completely past, present, and future. And knowing him as

he did Jesus should have let him go. Jesus should have taken one look at this guy and said you know what I think I'll find someone better. This is the man that wouldn't even admit he knew Jesus, not once but three times. This is the man who constantly and consistently attempted to convince Jesus not to die, even after Jesus had told him repeatedly that this was necessary. This is the man who was more worried about fitting in with the Jews in Antioch than in showing brotherly love to the Gentiles, so that Paul was forced to publicly rebuke him. And these are just the sins and shortcomings that we know about. Think about what Jesus knew about him. The secret jealousies, the petty hatreds, the selfish ambitions in Peter's heart. Yet knowing all this what did Jesus do? He took him and set him as the foundation and said to him go build my church.

What if Matt LaFleur went out and found a nobody, who may be played in high school but never anything else, and was 45 years old, and they knew full well would never really be a great player and said to them you're my new quarterback I'm going to build a great team on you.

This is the mystery. This is the impossible thing that should not be. That Jesus says to you, go and build my church. What right do we have to build the church of God. I know my heart; I know how much I would rather play video games than study the word or watch football games. The soldiers are nailing Christ to the cross and he says "Father forgive

them” but I can’t forgive this man for this one thing he said ten years ago. What right do I have to be a witness of Christ. What makes me possibly believe that this is what I should be doing? What gives Jessica, or Rebecca the right to believe that they can properly train children in the way of the Lord and in the word of the Lord to do what is right in the eyes of the Lord? What gives any of you the idea that you can speak correctly the mystery that is our God, to turn the hearts your neighbors to the word of God. Nothing, nothing, that is ludicrous to think that any of us can do any of that.

And yet Paul reminds us that in Christ God has “**committed to us the word of reconciliation.**” 2 Corinthians 5:19

Christ knows each of us, as he knew Simon, he knows our past and our present and our future, he knows our hearts and our minds, and He says you are forgiven, you are my child, go I want you to build my Church. That is a mystery, that is unbelievable, that God would give to us this forgiveness and this love.

What do you see?

What about you what have you seen and what have you witnessed when you encounter that mystery? If we are going to say to people, “come and see,” we need to know what mystery it is that we are bringing them to see.

This is a mystery we experience every week as we encounter Christ at church. The first thing you do here in this church is

to confess your sins and hear from the pastor by the specific direction of Christ himself the forgiveness of your sins. This is ridiculous and absurd. Such a thing should not be possible. It should be something you have to really work for. It should be something you have to do penance for, it should be, it should be . . . But it isn't.

The people of Jesus day rejected the idea that such a mystery could be possible. "You could not forgive sins." What did Jesus say to them. Oh yeah, you don't think I can perform that mystery, well explain this than, "Rise up, take your bed" to the lame man.

This is the mystery that we see here in church, and this is the mystery that we speak to others. That God became man. That he died for my sins. And that he rose again. It is simple, and yet it is impossible, and yet it is true.