

Epiphany 4  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

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## **The Mystery of You**

There are moments when you know you are a significant part of the universe. I walked into an office once many years ago. The lady at the desk with whom I wanted to visit pushed away from her computer. The phone rang, and she ignored it. I said politely, "Do you need to take that?" Her reply surprised and pleased me, "I'd much rather talk with a real person!"

My father was an extremely busy man. When he was actively working on the translation of the New Testament into the Tsafiqui language of western Ecuador, he could disappear into his study at 8, come out at 12 for lunch, and go back in until 5, day after day after day. In the evenings and on weekends he did house-maintenance, played with us kids, and went to Church (when we lived in the city.) There were also visits to Indians' homes, home church services, etc. As his translation project progressed the mission recognized his gift for Bible translation, and began shipping him all over the world to help others in their projects. They almost named him Translation Coordinator for the whole organization. One day I wanted to go up on the mountain hunting. My usual transportation for that is what's found on the ends of my legs, but one day Dad said, "I'll drive you up there." Wow—that was so affirming that I remember that trip like it was yesterday, even though it was 40 years ago. It wasn't the only time he did that, either. When he could he would carve out time for me. It wasn't every time, by any means, but it was enough to let me know that he valued me as his son and as a person.

I wonder if the people of Galilee didn't feel something like that in today's Gospel lesson. Galilee was the hinterlands, borderlands, the area between, that was really neither the Greek north nor the Jewish south. It was hick-country, such that when Andrew found Nathaniel after meeting Jesus and said, "Come and meet the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth," Nathaniel's reply was, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Oh, they had their share of teachers of the law who would stand up in Synagogue and pontificate about Torah, quoting important theologians from far away or the distant past, showing probably how educated they were more than what Torah required of them. And they had had their share of faith healers, kooks and quacks, sellers of snake oil, who often collected more money than they dished out miracles, and always appealing to and availing themselves of (at least purportedly) the power of another. So when Jesus comes it's something a bit different. Here is one who teaches without appealing to dead theologians, and who heals at a word or touch without appealing to higher powers. What

did they deserve to have such a one walk their streets? What special grace had they received? Jerusalem—move over, baby! Galilee is on the map!

This is really not too far removed from our experience. Day by day the sun rises and the sun sets, dependable, normal, and predictable. Yet the other day I was doing something in the house when Karisse called to me urgently. Come here, quickly! She was standing at the door. When I got to her side she pointed up into the sky. The sun was setting over the western mountains, turning the sky to flaming red and orange clouds. It was truly one of our spectacular New Mexico sunsets. When I see that I think that God is looking down on me. God is just letting me know that God still thinks I'm a good idea, a little glimpse of glory to remind me that I am important, cared for, and loved. Maybe my father's attention taught my heart to see the gifts from heaven.

I was out on Becky Campbell's ranch on the south side of the Burros with my hawk a week ago. A wizened old Mexican man walked up to me, leaning on the crooked stick he used for a cane. I have no idea how old he is. His skin was leathery and wrinkled. His knees bowed out, either from riding a horse for most of his life, or from sheer abuse. His hands looked like they could twist a corn cob in half at the middle. He had about 3 teeth in his head, and I had to shout at him and speak slowly, he was so hard of hearing.

He wanted to visit with me. We figured out quickly that Spanish was the language of choice for the occasion. We had a nice little conversation. He is with the broom makers cutting bear grass. They take the cut grass to Aguas Prietas every 4-6 weeks to sell. I learned from another source that he makes about \$15 a day. As we parted he gave me a toothless smile that came across as sincere as a young child. And there I was in a truck he could never own, out to spend some leisure time that wasn't after dark, wearing clothes newer than he had ever had, I'm sure, even though they were my "grungies," with more than 5 days' worth of his wages in my pocket—and he smiled at me sincerely.

I can't help but wonder, "What is his real story?" What is the majesty of a life of hard labor and scant means? What is the mystery that made him happy at the end of the day? What joys has he known that I might never know? What sorrows has he endured that have made him strong and compassionate?

A harder question, perhaps is, "What makes him just like me, in spite of the differences?" There are many answers, but I think maybe the most significant is, "We have both tasted of mystery." We have both encountered that which is beyond us, and yet as loving as it is great. We have both been broken open, had the scales fall from our eyes from time to time, to see how precious people are.

Look around you. Look at these precious people. Maybe you think you know their stories, but do you really? Maybe you think you know who they are, but do you really? They are a treasure trove, worth nurturing, caring for and connecting with. What riches might be both of yours if the relationship you foster is caring? What glories might you both know if the attitude of your heart is to seek mystery with them? What might it cost you—that is worth paying?

No wonder Paul in the Epistle lesson today says, "If it would cause my brother to stumble to eat meat offered to idols, I will not eat meat again!" He understands how spiritually valuable his relationships with his fellow Christians are. He knows that not only he, but every one is a significant part of the universe. He knows that God's love is no greater or less for any particular person within the Church or without.

We taste of mystery in many places. God gifts us with beautiful sunsets and sunrises, majestic mountains and rivers, cliffs and plains. We find unexpected beauty, surprising kindness, and hidden goodness all around us. But I would still offer that the greatest place where we encounter the mystery of God is in the face of one another, in the stories of our lives as we share them, and as we stand shoulder-to-shoulder to serve the world in Christ's name.