

Explore the Bible: Is Jesus fully God?

February 22, 2017

• *The Explore the Bible lesson for March 12 focuses on Matthew 17:1-13.*

On a drive across the northeastern corner of New Mexico years ago, we decided to change drivers. It was the middle of the night. I was very tired and needed a break. We had miles and miles to go to our home in Texas.

Out in the wilderness, there was no artificial light—not so much as a yellow light bulb on the porch of a distant ranch house. We were all alone on that stretch of lonesome highway. We pulled the car to the side of the road. I opened the door, and my eyes were drawn like a magnet to the night sky. For a moment, it felt as though my eyes would pop out of my head. I'd never seen stars like that before—billions upon billions and then some. It was the measureless hand of God's creation!

For a moment, I stood there, lost in the mystery of it all. God's limitless night sky stunned me into utter stillness. For a moment, I couldn't move.

Lost in wonder

The simple memory of the experience brings to mind the words of Charles Wesley's hymn, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling." Wesley wrote: "Finish, then, Thy new creation; Pure and spotless let us be. Let us see Thy great salvation perfectly restored in Thee; Changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place, till we cast our crowns before Thee, lost in wonder, love and praise."

I was lost in wonder, love and praise! I needed no more evidence there is a God. My parents and my grandparents had taught of me of God's love in

Jesus, and I had trusted their witness until, over time, their faith became mine. That night, I had my own personal encounter with the living God, and I never will forget it. Although I was standing on a dark ribbon of pavement snaking its way through the dark, moonless, empty prairie, I was having my own mountaintop experience.

Filled with mystery

We come to a passage today that, perhaps more than any other in all the New Testament, is filled with mystery. Too often, we dismiss the “mysterious” in Scripture, even the miracles, as something God once did but does no longer. Maybe it’s been too long since we stared at the night sky or the birds of the air or the flowers of the field.

The God who revealed himself still reveals himself, every day in more ways than we can imagine. Understanding this text demands that we take a step back from our cynicism and allow it to tell its own story, even though, especially though, we cannot fully understand it. Would we truly want a love like God’s we could fully understand?

As the writer of Hebrews stated it: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word,” (Hebrews 1:1-3).

A holy moment

In the simplest terms, Jesus took Peter, James and John to a sacred and lonely place so that there, in ways we can’t understand or fathom, he could reveal himself to them to be who he fully was. Visitors from another realm, Moses and Elijah, appeared for the moment of blessing, scaring the disciples all but to death.

As though that were not enough, a voice spoke from a cloud, repeating the same words Jesus heard at his baptism. It was the voice of God saying, again, “This is my Son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him” (verse 5).

It was such a holy moment, the disciples wanted to build temples of worship and stay on the mountaintop. They didn’t understand what Jesus was about to explain. They had far to go. They’d had the moment to verify to them, so their faith would be forever their own, that Jesus was the Messiah.

Go live it out

Now, it was time to stop staring at the mystery and go live it out. That would mean not staying still in a singularly holy moment or place, but to follow Jesus to Jerusalem where he would suffer. Just as Elijah had suffered for his faith, Jesus would suffer as well. God’s love was going to cost Jesus his life, very painfully and in no less than the greatest of all humiliation. It was then, in that moment, the seed of faith came to life in the disciples, maybe for the very first time.

Jesus needed them to know that loving like God loves, truly following Jesus, always hurts before it blesses, if ever it does in ways we can measure this side of eternity.

Know, trust and live

To unpack this entire text will take a lifetime. In the first six verses of Ephesians 3, Paul refers to the “mystery of Christ” three times. Yet, it’s important to remember that, as a late mentor of mine who led me to my own faith explained years ago, the gospel is not a mystery in the sense that it is a puzzle to be solved but a reality to be celebrated. We will never fully understand what we are asked to fully trust.

Just as the appearance of Moses and Elijah and the voice of God reminded the disciples, the mystery of the night sky only reminds me of the limitless love of God in Christ, God's immeasurable mercy, God's incomprehensible grace and faithfulness. That is what Jesus wanted the disciples to know and celebrate, then go to suffer and die to prove.

It is also what Jesus wants us to know, trust and live, too.

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