



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

A CHRISTMAS MYSTERY Clues of the Covenant

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Introduction

Colonel Mustard in the library with a candlestick. Miss Marple. Sherlock Holmes. The Hardy Boys. Father Brown. Hercule Poirot. Nancy Drew. Scotland Yard. Murder She Wrote. What are we talking about? *Mysteries...* all solved because someone spots the *clues*.

People love them. Mysteries make a mountain of money for their publishers. They are turned into movies and TV series. As a literary genre, mysteries move from order, to disorder, and back to order. That's why they are satisfying. That's why we like them.

The Mystery of Jesus

Jesus presented a mystery in his day. By his very existence, he was a mystery. Everywhere he went, people asked: "Who is this man? Who does he say he is? Who do we think he is? Who is he really? What is his message?" His very being was disturbing, as were his actions, his words, his presence, his power, his draw. Even those who knew him and traveled with him, even his disciples, even his family could not understand him. They could not pin down just who he was and what he was about. All through his ministry, he raised discussion, but then with his arrest and trial and death and burial—well, there was absolutely no understanding that. The mystery of Jesus darkened into the depression of grief and lost hope.

But beginning on the very day of his resurrection, on that first Easter, the light of understanding began to dawn. On that very day as two sad men trudged side by side, recalling the terrible events that had just happened in Jerusalem, another traveler joined them. He listened to their weary conversation and then said, "How slow to believe all that the

prophets have spoken....’ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:25, 27).

He showed that everything that had happened to Jesus accorded with the promises of God, the covenants God had made. That newcomer was Jesus. For those two travelers, the mystery was solved. What did they learn that day? What was there in the writings of Moses and the prophets that explained the mystery of Jesus?

May I present to you this morning **A CHRISTMAS MYSTERY: Clues of the Covenant.**

The classic cozy mystery begins in a gentle setting, often a quiet village where people tend their roses and sit down to tea. It is an ordered life, broken one dark day by a crime, something evil, a death. “Who did this?” they ask. “What has disturbed our peace? Why did this happen? Who can understand it?” Into the disorder and disturbance comes someone who follows clue after clue after clue until all is revealed, truth triumphs, order returns, peace prevails, and the reader closes the book and sighs with satisfaction.

That plot—order to disorder and back to order—is also the whole plot of the Bible. It begins in Genesis and ends in Revelation. The story opens in a garden. There is peace and plenty. There is work to do and relationship to enjoy. Into this settled beauty comes a crime, a disobedience, a betrayal, a violence, an enemy. All is broken, all is disturbed.

Clue #1: Genesis 3

Into the disorder, God comes, God speaks, and God promises. In Genesis 3:15 God curses the enemy, the serpent, the deceiver. God speaks to him: “From this woman Eve whom you deceived will come a descendant. You will bruise him, but he will crush you.” From the first pages of scripture comes the promise of one who will come to defeat the enemy, restore order, and make things right again. It is the first gospel promise, the first covenant.

Let’s pause a moment and talk about the word “covenant.” Covenants are solemn promises establishing what the relationship between God

and his people will be. They are commitments about what God will do but also about who God will be for us and who we will be as God's people. Is a covenant like a contract? Sort of. A covenant is more solemn, more sacred, more binding than a mere contract. A contract is about law. A covenant blends law and love. Covenant carries the gravitas of a binding legal agreement and also the intimacy of a committed relationship. Always God is the initiator. He creates covenant and calls us into it. Covenant promises are voluntary, binding vows to be faithful, no matter what.

God's promise in Genesis chapter 3 is the first covenant promise. It is Clue #1 in unlocking the mystery of Jesus, of who he is and why he came. Into the tragic disorder of sin entering the planet, God promises a descendant who will defeat the tempter, the enemy. There are a handful of these great covenants, each building on the previous ones, enlarging and expanding on them. Throughout the Old Testament, the covenants slowly unfold the promises of God for us. Little by little, God reveals his character, his plans. The covenants are God's gospel promises.

Clue #2: The Abraham Covenant

Next comes Clue #2: the covenant with Abraham. It is told in Genesis chapters 12–25. God calls one man to do something dramatic, to leave everything—his home, his family, his kinfolk, his land—and go to an unknown place that God will show him. Abraham hears God and follows. In Genesis 12, 15, 17, 21 and 22, God promises more and more. Abraham will have a son who will found a family which will become a nation and will one day fill a particular area of land. The promises only grow as the Lord reaffirms and expands them over years. Always it is God who initiates, God who plans and promises. In choosing to bless one man, Abraham, God promises that all people, all nations will be blessed because of it. The blessing is for all people, right down to you and me.

God renames Abraham and his wife Sarah. He gives them their rightful names, their real identity, revealing to them who they truly are. Have you ever thought of that? That God alone, your Creator, knows your real name, your true identity. Let him tell you who you are. His voice is kinder than other voices you hear, including your own.

Years pass and the Lord deepens the covenant promises to a childless couple. After long years of waiting the promised son was born. A nation was promised, but it began with one very beloved child named Isaac. The years have deepened Abraham's understanding and worship of God. Abraham understands the chasm between the almighty and perfectly holy God and himself, a mortal who is not sinless. How can one atone? What sacrifice can be offered to pay the penalty, to make things right? Abraham saw that he should offer to God what was most beloved, his child. So unthinkable to us, but not strange in ancient times.

You've heard the story from Genesis 21. Together Abraham and his son Isaac climb a mountain. Isaac asks, "I see the fire and the wood but where is the lamb for the offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide himself the lamb." Thus another covenant promise is laid down. God will himself provide the sacrifice for our sin. In the story, an angel stops the hand of Abraham and shows him a male lamb caught in a thicket. God provided the sacrifice for sin that day. It is a covenant promise that in a final way, God would provide a sacrifice for sin. When did that happen? Where did God himself become the sacrificial lamb? The covenant with Abraham stands and hundreds of years pass.

Clue #3: The Moses Covenant

Next comes Moses and the covenant God made with him, Clue #3. Isaac's family has grown into a large people group, living in Egypt where they have become a political problem and have been forced into slavery. God calls Moses to be the deliverer of all these people. The family promised to Abraham is established and it is now time to move into the land promised to Abraham. You know this epic story recounted in the book of Exodus. Moses confronts Pharaoh, demands release, and by mighty acts of God leads the people out of slavery and the journey to the promised land begins. The covenant promises that God would from one man, create one family who would expand into one nation who would have one chosen land, comes to reality. The family, the nation and the land had all been promised centuries before to Abraham. But here is what is unique about Moses' story.

God adds to the covenant promises and the covenant relationship. Remember, God had told Abraham and Sarah their true names. Now God tells Moses God's own true name—the great name "I AM." When

Moses is first called to confront Pharaoh, he asks, "Who shall I say called me?" and God answers, "Tell them I AM sent you." Years later Moses prays: "Teach me your ways so I may know you...show me your glory." And God replies:

"I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence....

And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands..."

The LORD said: "I am making a covenant with you."

Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshiped. This story is told in Exodus 33.

God reveals his name, and also his character, his nature. The covenant unfolds further and God gives the people the Law, the commandments which tell them that they are people who have a God with whom they are in relationship. In the commandments, God shows how they are to live together, with God and with one another. The Ten Commandments set inexpressible dignity upon these people, dignity upon them individually and as a community. The Commandments say, "This is how you should be treated and this is how you should treat every other person." God said, "I am the LORD your God.... I broke the yoke of slavery from your neck so you can walk with your heads held high" (Leviticus 26:13).

The Ten Commandments are unsurpassed in expressing moral excellence. They have been disregarded, disputed, and disobeyed, but never bettered. The Lord promised that through Abraham all people would be blessed. The Commandments are part of that blessing. They have been foundational to our own legal system and to our understanding of human rights. But with the Law arises a great problem. In his final words to his people, in Deuteronomy, Abraham spells out this truth: abundant blessings come to those who obey all of the commandments; a terrible curse falls on those who fail to keep them. But what of us? Who of us has perfectly kept the moral law of God? No one. What of the curse that must fall? On whom did it fall? Who bore the penalty of failing to keep the Law? When did it happen?

Clue #4: The David Covenant

There is one more covenant, Clue #4. At last, Abraham's promised descendants were settled in the promised land. Over centuries, God had kept the promise. There comes the Golden Age of Israel. God chooses for the people a king, David. Though he is an unimportant younger son, God calls him. His life is amazing, his achievements very great, his talents remarkable. The covenants with Abraham and Moses have been realized, but not yet in all their fullness. With David, God further unfolds and deepens the covenant. David becomes a great king of a great kingdom. He determines to build a great Temple for God, but God stops him. What does it mean? Rather than David building a house for God, God will build a house for David—a lasting dynasty—and from this line of David will come the Messiah. God establishes a covenant with David, building on the previous covenants and looking forward to the ultimate establishment of God's reign on the earth. God promises that from David's descendants would come a greater king whose rule would be without end, who would have an eternal kingdom. This is told in 2 Samuel 7.

Adam and Eve, Abraham, Moses and David. Have the covenant promises to each been realized? Have the promises been kept? Yes, but not in their entire fullness. Eve wondered at her mysterious promise—that a descendant of hers would be bruised by the Enemy, the Evil One even as he crushed the enemy. Abraham wondered what sacrifice could be offered to a holy God to erase the sins he and all of us carry? Moses knew that a curse would fall on those who failed to keep the perfect Law. Who would bear that curse? What offering would be enough? Through long years, the people waited for the promised descendant of Eve, of Abraham, of David.

The Covenant Kept

And then came Jesus. The Gospel writer Luke traces Jesus' earthly lineage all the way back to Adam, and names King David who is in that line. The Gospel writer Matthew begins with these words: "The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham." Jesus is the promised descendant, the awaited Messiah. How is he the covenant keeper? The fulfillment of all those promises?

Throughout his life, Jesus perfectly kept the law. The Bible makes that clear. Let's go to the end of Jesus' earthly life. Darkness descended on that awful crucifixion day. In the midst of the darkness, there was God, in the person of Jesus, literally having his body bruised, literally having his body torn, literally bearing the curse that Moses had foreseen. Paul writes:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us...He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:13-14

And so it happened. The promised descendant of Adam and Eve, of Abraham, of David was born. The awaited Messiah, the anointed one, arrived. The coming of Jesus has been called the hinge of history. It has been said that with the birth of Jesus, time turned a corner.

Over centuries and millennia, even before creation, this was in the plans and purposes of God. His intentions were inclined towards us, to not leave us to the Evil one who deceived Adam and Eve, to restore us to a right relationship with the God who made us. He intends good for us. As Abraham and Moses and David saw, we are people who have a God worthy of our loyalty and worship and obedience.

All is revealed...

And all is revealed. That's how classic mysteries end. And so does this one. The promise to us through Eve, that one would come to crush the Enemy. The promise to Abraham about his descendants. The promise to Moses about keeping the requirements of the moral law. The promise to David of a king whose kingdom would never end. Where is the ending of our mystery? On the last page, of course!

The disciple John wrote in Revelation 19:

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True... on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself...: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

George Frideric Handel read those words and turned them into the *Hallelujah* chorus.

That day on the road to Emmaus, the men with whom Jesus walked and to whom he opened the scriptures and showed them who he was... what was their reply? "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking with us on the road and explaining the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32)

And so may it be for you. May your heart burn with the glory of all that God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

In Genesis 17:7 God said:

"I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you."

Paul wrote in Colossians 1:25-26:

The mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, is now disclosed to the Lord's people.

And Isaiah wrote (25:1):

LORD, you are my God;
I will exalt you and praise your name,
for in perfect faithfulness
you have done wonderful things,
things planned long ago.

Jesus is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. But that is not how he entered the world that first Christmas. He came quietly, in obscurity, and in the vulnerability of infancy. He came with devastating humility. And so he still will come quietly and with that same devastating humility into any human heart that will open to welcome him again and again. ■