

<sup>31</sup> At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." <sup>32</sup> And he said to them, "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course.'<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.' <sup>34</sup> O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! <sup>35</sup> Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!'"

Lent – the season of preparation – preparation for what?

Preparation for Easter. How do we prevent Easter from being like the movie "Groundhog Day"?

There's the semi-old joke: *When Jesus comes out of His tomb, we all want to know if He sees His shadow, so we know if spring is coming or if there is six more weeks of winter.*

And there is also the notion spawned by the movie with the name "Groundhog Day," in which Bill Murray keeps doing the same day over and over again. *How we do Lent*, the worship committee opined, *has much to do with whether we do Easter over and over again, every year – same old same old, with the constant fear* (as enunciated in the book "Prayer for Owen Meany") – *What if this is the year that Jesus does not resurrect?*

How can we prepare for Easter so that it is really alive?!

As the worship committee danced with this idea, the one thing to which we kept returning is the notion of **MYSTERIUM – the reality, the realization, that there is more to life than meets the eye.**

**MYSTERIUM** is the old, old standard of the CHURCH, later largely thrown out because of the abuses of superstition and power mongering by the church, and is today being lived out by a faithful few, and (as I will note later) is now becoming validated by science.

**MYSTERIUM** says that **there IS more to life than what the five senses normally distill as the only reality.**

So the worship committee is suggesting that a practice of, and looking into MYSTERIUM – and the contrasts that the Kingdom of Heaven AT HAND can offer us.

**If we cannot accept the reality of something over and above the experience of our five senses, then the simple truth is that – regardless of how well we fake it -- we simply cannot accept the reality of resurrection.**

And, so, in the alternative, we put on new clothing, buy some lilies, put some pretty flowers on the cross outside, and pretend that we don't really believe in the resurrection, but somehow hope that nonetheless it will be a possibility for after we die ... because we really hope that there is something more.

**MYSTERIUM** – the contrasts offered by the **CENTRAL MESSAGE OF JESUS: THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS AT HAND** – is necessary if our faith is going to be real and not fraudulent.

So – the worship committee is suggesting the following ways that we look at the contrasts of the Kingdom of Heaven at hand:

**Feb. 17: Conditional language/Satan vs. Unconditional Love/God** – we looked at this this past Wednesday, at the Lenten Luncheon.

**TODAY** we are going to look at: **Mysticism versus Moralism** – the way that Jesus taught about the Kingdom versus the shallow substitute upon which the Church has today largely rested its authority and appeal.

**Feb. 28: Kingdom living vs. Earthly-bound living**

**March 6: Old self vs. a New Creation in Christ**

**March 13: Extravagant giving (Mary) vs. Selfish thievery (Judas)**

Let me offer ONE SHORT TWO WORD SUMMARY FOR TODAY: **Stop Counting!**

In today's scripture, the **Pharisees** come to warn Jesus of the danger ahead presented by Herod.

Now, we need to be clear about the Pharisees, who really get such a bad rap in our view of the Good Guys and the Bad Guys in the Bible. Actually, they were not such bad people ... **IN THEIR PLACE.**

Pharisees would make great Sunday School teachers. They taught the importance of rules – that gave structure to good, clean, living. You can't do the later life work of spiritual growth that goes beyond the rules, if you don't first know the rules. Pharisees did that. They were the purists. Their biggest problem with Jesus was that

they were stuck on the rule keeping, and were put to shame by Jesus' emphasis on the RELATIONSHIP NATURE of the Kingdom of Heaven.

But – if you look at the Gospels of Mark and Luke, you will note that as soon as the religious oligarchy of Judaism moved from debating with Jesus into the nasty business of Holy Week – trial, scourging, crucifixion, and passion – the Pharisees are never mentioned. They disagreed with Jesus but never wanted anything to do with the horrible miscarriage of justice that resulted in His arrest and execution as a criminal. They just wanted to keep nice black and white rules.

They wanted order.

They wanted to C O U N T.

So that we can be on the same page, let me suggest a common understanding of terms – just for this sermon; this is not a complete definition of all the aspects of terms.

The sermon title is **MYSTICISM versus MORALISM**.

By **MYSTICISM**, don't let your mind wander to burning incense and exotic sorts of body configurations and hours long of marathon prayer. For today's purposes, allow MYSTICISM to mean just this: **BEING IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD; BEING IN COMMUNION WITH GOD – IN THIS PARTICULAR MOMENT, which then shapes how all of your other moments are experienced.**

**MORALISM** – on the other hand -- **always wants to keep score**. It's all about:

- (a) how well I am doing, in comparison to some idealistic notion of perfection, making me perfectly acceptable to God
- (b) how well someone else is doing, in comparison to some idealistic notion of perfection, making that other person acceptable to God
- (c) how well I am doing, morally, in comparison to the other person. Much of the moralistic life is spent making this comparison – either making myself look good by comparison, OR (and this is very prevalent!) making myself feel inferior because I do not practice the morals of – oh, say, Mother Teresa.

**Dr. James Doty**, a neurosurgeon, who also engages in neuroplasticity research, on the impact of contemplation, compassion, altruism, and heroism, **said that his life of delinquency was turned around when he met a woman who explained life to him, through the medium of MAGIC TRICKS. Sleight of hand magic tricks are so easily**

accomplished because the people in the audience are not really present; are not really paying attention to the hands of the magician. Why? **Because most people today have 80% of their attention in any given awake moment on (a) regret over the past and (b) anxiety over the future. It's all about keeping score of where we've been and where we are going to go. We are so seldom actually in the present.**

Let me give an example of the truth of that 80% rule, I discovered from a simple life situation.

Some of you I am sure have not noticed this, but my life is largely a struggle with keeping excess weight off. So, the other day, I am eating an ice cream sandwich. In the midst of eating this ice cream sandwich, my mind suddenly kicked in to this interview of Dr. James Doty – about the 80% figure he gave. And I realized something: While I was eating this ice cream sandwich, my mind was thinking about two things: (1) I should not be eating this. This is not going to help me lose weight. (2) I can't wait until I can eat another. Boy! I will really feel guilty for doing that. But I know; I know right now that I am not going to have the will power to stop with eating just one of these. Daggone it! I should have gotten the miniature ones. That way, when my will power fails me and I eat two, it's really only as bad as eating one.

BOOM! Interrupt! **The Dr. James Doty: 80% Rule.**

- What am I doing? (1) I am fixating on my guilt for having opened this ice cream sandwich. (2) I am dealing with the given that I will be a failure and eat a second one, and the guilt that will go along with that.
- What am I NOT doing? I am not paying attention to eating the ice cream sandwich. I am not getting any enjoyment out of this experience.
- Pay attention. Eat ice cream sandwich. Do not allow thoughts of past nor future interfere with the current pleasure of eating the ice cream sandwich.

Strangest thing happened! When I focused on the joy of eating the ice cream sandwich, I did not deal with either the guilt of eating it, nor the anxiety of eating a second one. I just was in the moment of the pleasure of eating it.

**AND I was content with that pleasure. I did not need to eat another one.**

Now, let me be clear: **MYSTICAL UNION WITH GOD is NOT just about seeking pleasure, like eating an ice cream sandwich.**

But it **IS** about **letting go of the COUNTING that goes along with moralism.**

OUR BEING IN COMMUNION WITH GOD – in the very moment of NOW, not just after we die and go to the pearly gates – OUR BEING IN COMMUNION WITH GOD, NOW! does not have anything to do with the counting of moralism.

In fact, our constant counting and comparison of

- how well I am doing,
- how well you are doing,
- how poorly those **Blankety-Blank-people-who-scare-me** are doing.

(Footnote: from Dr. Doty's research: when we spend so much energy of fearing those Blankety-Blank-people, we limit the scope of our vision, to where that is all we are able to see: FEAR. And it will eat us up!)

are all factors that PREVENT us from being in the moment of communion with God.

Jesus is presented with a warning of threat, and He shrugs it off. He will not allow anything to keep Him from His mission. He is on His way to Jerusalem to be the Mother Hen who gathers her chicks under her wings.

Some people read this as a sign of promise – of the mystical communion of being as close to God as a chick under the wings of a mother hen.

Other people count the points involved. They see themselves as some kind of sinner not able to be gathered under the Mother Hen's wings – not unless they do something to wipe out their negative score.

**It's hard for some people to stop counting.**

- They have been instructed by the Pharisees all along the way of the importance of the moralistic score keeping.
- They believe that they should be getting a better God score, and – at the same time -- they feel guilty because they have been focusing more on their worldly success score than their God score.
- So they end up having a lot of guilt and frustration.
- That causes many people to just let go of the whole religion thing and focus on keeping their worldly success score, without the guilt.

Sometimes – quite often – it takes a **FALLING DOWN** – to let go of the score keeping, to stop the counting. And to simply allow Grace to pick you back up and brush you off and tell you that God is not keeping score at all, at all. God only wants to gather you in and hold you and keep you safe and warm – IN THIS VERY MOMENT.

Another thing – and here is where I get such a kick – where modern day science is beginning to “prove” the truth of mysterium. When we engage in prayer and contemplation – even for as little as 15/20 minutes a day, over as short as two weeks time – our actual brain structure and function begins to change in a way which makes it easier to be in the present and to stop counting. Yes, science is coming around to allow us skeptics to believe what the experience of the mystics over the centuries have been showing with their lives.

Falling down.

Continued Practice of Prayer.

Both work, Both will help us let go of the counting, and allow us to experience the extraordinary continued living in the Presence and Communion of God’s embrace in the very moment of now. And living in that Presence changes how all of the rest of life looks and gets lived. (But that’s the stuff of later sermons.)

Well, here’s the **VERY GOOD NEWS**. God STILL longs to **gather Her children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings. And that is true, whether or not we are willing.**

Whatever may be holding you back, you need to know – God is still willing, and **YOUR hangup is not God’s hangup.**

We may count, but God does not.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.