

✠ Matthew 1:18-25 ✠

IN NOMINE IESU

Scientists in lab coats and oversized protective goggles, surrounded by vials and steaming liquids of unknown origin cannot unravel the mystery of water. They can break down the parts, two hydrogen molecules and an oxygen molecule, and they can describe water, it's wet and a fluid, it freezes and becomes solid, it heats and becomes gas, which can all be turned back into the liquid form. It is the best base for acid and it makes up a large percentage of the earth and all that is in it. But for all that science can do with and to water, and for all they can describe it and break it down, scientists cannot create water, they cannot unravel the mystery of water.

They can put two hydrogen molecules and an oxygen molecule together, and they can say that they have water, but there is no wetness to their two hydrogen molecules and one oxygen molecule. It does not look, taste, feel, or even act like water. How water has its properties is a mystery. I would say, a divine mystery. And such is the mystery of all things. The farmer's beans and kernels of wheat grow and come to life, but science cannot tell us how. Science can break the process down into its finest points and chemically describe everything that happens, but they cannot unravel the mystery of why or how the lifeless beans and wheat kernels become living plants.

And I suspect scientists will continue to fight this battle of the why and how until our Lord returns; for science is precisely 'science' because it continues to seek answers. And so it should. It honors God to look into His creation and discover the intricacies of His love and care and wisdom. Of course, it dishonors God to try and explain the how and why without the six days of creation, but that's not science's fault. It is not science that discounts God and His work, it's the sinner wearing the white lab coat who discounts God and His work.

So it is with the one who tries to explain away the virgin birth and the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God. It is not that we should not try to plumb the depths of this greatest of all mysteries, that we should not try to discover its beauty and significance. But no matter how deep we plumb or how majestically we describe the virgin birth, we will never understand the how, the mechanics of it. It will always remain a mystery that the Virgin conceived and gave birth to a son. And that is proper because God is a mystery. God's salvation is a mystery. God's love is a mystery. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that everything the Church does and partakes of is a mystery.

We will never understand how the Word of God intertwines itself with water so that the water of Baptism becomes a living water, rich in grace and washing of renewal and rebirth by the Holy Spirit. We will never understand how bread and wine become and are Jesus' body and blood. We will never understand how eating Christ's body and drinking His blood marries us to Him so that we become incorporated into His living body. We will never understand how our prayers affect God's will when He is sovereign. We will never unravel the mystery of the power of the Word of God, the Gospel, to create faith.

We will never understand, and we would do well to admit as much. After all, when we begin to think that we can understand these things in their mode of being, in their essence, to

unravel the mystery of how and even why, then we begin to shave off large chunks of what God says and gives to us. For example, when theologians began to try and define the mystery of God becoming flesh, they ended up denying that Jesus was true God, and said that He had God's Spirit, but was not God Himself. Thus heresy was born. This is how all heresy begins: by trying to define the mysteries of God.

Thus the heresy of the Anabaptists. They tried to answer the mystery of how Baptism saves you, bending knee to logic and reason which say water cannot save, and ended up denying that Baptism, an ordinance of Jesus, was unnecessary and affected nothing but was mere ritual, despite the apostolic witness to the contrary.

So the Reformer, John Calvin, tried to answer the mystery of what it means that the bread and wine becomes the body and blood of Christ, and ended up denying the simple word of Jesus: this is my body; this is my blood. So, too, with Lutherans. There was a time when Lutherans tried to answer the mystery of how we are simultaneously sinner and saint, and ended up denying that we continue to sin after regeneration. Which gave birth to yet another heresy, Pietism; a heresy we still feel the devastating effects of today. Man's folly knows no boundary of denominationalism or organizational loyalty.

If you want to become a heretic, you don't need to stop reading your Bible. You don't need to stop believing that Jesus is the Christ or that He is the Messiah. You don't need to curse God. All you need do is try to unravel the mysteries of God. How can the Son be equal to the Father yet inferior to the Father? Oh, simple, according to His divinity He is equal and according to His humanity He is inferior. True, but wasn't it the man, Jesus, who said, "Before Abraham was, I AM"? Therefore we neither confuse the essence nor divide the person. Jesus is true God, begotten of His Father before all worlds, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary. Try to answer the one and you will deny the other; try to emphasize the one and you will forget the other.

If you want to remain true to Scripture and true to the Gospel, simply take what it says. Don't try to figure it out. Don't try to mastermind the Master of all minds. Don't try to shut up the treasure trove of God's wisdom with your own feeble wisdom. Simply believe what God says. Then you will stand before kings and governors and confidently and boldly assert the truth of God in Christ and all that it entails, and will do so with strength and the knowledge that you stand on firm ground.

But just as much as you should not try to unravel the mysteries of God to try and answer the mysteries, neither should you think that because it is a mystery that means you cannot be sure of it and defend it with bravado. Simply because it is a mystery how the bread and wine is Christ's body and blood does not mean you should not assert that it is. Simply because you don't know how the water and the Word saves you in Holy Baptism doesn't mean that if someone doesn't believe that it does, that you've no right to correct them.

Quite to the contrary, you stand on the witness of the Word of God that says Baptism now saves you. I fear that all too often we sink into the muck and mire of tolerance and equality saying that we cannot force our opinions and views on others, and so we fail to speak the truth for fear of being seen as intolerant. This is damnable because it relegates God's Word to our opinion and personal view. It allows for the lie that God's Word says one thing to me and another to someone else. To hell with that. God's Word is sure and is reliable and will stand against any of our own personal views and opinions. I fear there will be many in hell saying to

our Lord, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, did we not cast out demons in your name, and heal in you name?” And He will say to them, “Depart from me you workers of lawlessness, I never knew you for you denied me before men by relegating my Word to mere opinions and conjectures.”

For as much as we will never understand the mysteries of God, and will become heretics if we try to unravel them, we can still know them securely and assuredly. A mystery is not a mystery because it is unknown but because it defies our reason. Just because we don't understand how the death of God is the death of death, or even how God could die, does not mean it is not so and that we cannot believe and know it is true. We are fully capable of being positively right. We can know the truth and we can expose the lies of the devil. We can preach the truth and we can live for and die for the truth.

Thus do we sing, On Christ the Solid Rock I stand all other ground is sinking sand. The virgin conceived and gave birth to a son, and they called His name Immanuel, God with us, naming Him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.

You are His people. Not because you belong to a church or because you believe most of the time or because you're a good person or because you call yourself 'Christian', or even because you are a sinner. You are His people because you are human. He is Immanuel, God with us. That does not just mean that He is here somewhere or that He comes around and is in the midst of us, though He does and is. But it means that He became one of us. He is God with us in a way that none of us can ever be man with God. We cannot become God. Our humanity does not allow us to ascend on high. Our humanity earns us nothing and gains us no profit.

But He does. The Child born of Mary, the son of the virgin, is the Son of God. That baby grew up and became a man. That man died a horrible death on a cross, the cursed tree. He became the curse of sin and death for you. He has borne your sicknesses and diseases; He has taken upon Himself the chastisement of God meant for us. He has borne the consequence and punishment of sin. He died the death of the sinner, so that you may live His life of peace, love, and joy.

That is why the Christmas season is the season of hope and love, peace and joy, for the virgin conceived and gave birth to a son, and they called Him Immanuel, God with us.

In the name of the FATHER and of the ✠ SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT.

✠ AMEN ✠