
It's a Secret

Romans 16:25-27

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 18, 2011, by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

I once had a male colleague who was kind, thoughtful, reliable and generous. His girlfriend was stylish, classy, flamboyant and talented. There was always a slight suspicion she was out of his league. When the day of their wedding came, everyone had a great time, until the meal was over, the tables were cleared, the band struck up, the couple stood face to face, and it was time for that special moment: their first dance as husband and wife.

The bridegroom for an instant took his eyes off his lovely bride, looked over to the band leader, and winked. The rhythm of the music suddenly changed, from a slow, romantic waltz to a throbbing salsa, and the new husband stepped and strode around the dance floor with a grace and ease that no one at the reception had ever seen from him before. The bride was astonished, dumbfounded, and delighted: she'd not seen this side of him, or ever had any idea there *was* this side of him. In that moment she realized there might be a whole lot more to her new husband than the kind, thoughtful, reliable and generous gentleman she thought she'd married.

Like an uncorked bottle of champagne, an explosion of comment and speculation mushroomed out from the dance floor to the excited and bewildered guests. Quickly, from ear to electrified ear, the outline of a story emerged. Salsa dancing was, as many of the guests knew, one of the bride's great hobbies, and it had always been a source of grief, if not just cause or impediment, to her that her fiancé didn't share her interest and talent.

Her boyfriend knew what everyone took to be the dynamics of the relationship. He had no desire to be a second-rate husband. So, in the year between the engagement and the wedding, he attended weekly salsa classes, unbeknown to his future wife. The result was that on the wedding day, for the first time, his new skills were stunningly revealed. He loved her so much, he worked all that time in secret to surprise and delight her in their first dance as husband and wife.

How romantic. How thrilling. But also, don't you think, a little scary? Because if I'd been that bride, I'd have been thinking, "I wonder how many other secrets he's got up his sleeve. And I wonder if they're all nice ones. If he's this good at hiding happy secrets, I wonder if he's just as good at hiding ugly ones."

That's the thing about secrets. If it's a brown paper package tied up with string, and it's sitting pretty under the Christmas tree; and it's only a few days from Christmas, and you've made it absolutely clear that you don't want yet another cook book or a shapeless sweater or a gardening implement unsubtly hinting that you finally do some yard work; then the chances are it's an exciting secret, and you wait with expectation spiced with intrigue.

But if you keep dialing your brother, and he won't return your calls, and he won't text or email you even though you know he's on his handheld device every second of the day, and last time you saw him he wouldn't look you in the eye; then you know he's bearing a secret that's sooner or later going to cascade over you like a dark cloud unleashing a hailstorm.

Secrets are very complex. If a rich and powerful person, or group of people, is withholding from large sections of the public something that might affect their financial and professional decisions, or endanger their well-being, people are furious, and talk about misuse of office, and hold lengthy hearings and inquiries about who knew what and when and who organized or condoned the cover-up.

But if a poor or ordinary person suddenly finds themselves the center of public attention, and in the eye of a media frenzy, due to an accident of history or their proximity to tragedy or their relationship to a person who's committed a famous crime, we tend to feel they're entitled to their privacy and they should be able to keep secrets if they want to.

We call 9/11, or Pearl Harbor, or the false assumption there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, failures of "intelligence," but intelligence is a euphemism for spying and spying is the discovery of secrets. Yet if someone was tapping our phone lines, *they* might call it intelligence, but *we'd* be very angry.

At the end of his Letter to the Romans, Paul speaks of "the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed." Ponder that phrase for a moment: "the revelation... of the mystery... that was kept secret for long ages... but is now disclosed." There's a difference between a secret and a mystery. When a secret is disclosed, it's over and gone. But when a mystery's revealed it's only just begun. A secret gets less interesting the more you know of it; a mystery gets more absorbing the deeper you enter into it.

Think back to that bridegroom on the dance floor. The fact that he'd been going to salsa classes for a year without his fiancée having any idea was a *secret*. It was ingenious, but it was liable to attract all kinds of anxiety and misgivings. But the depth of his love for his new wife, love that showed patience and reserve, was prepared to get no credit and work hard and long to make her happy and bond the two of them together, that depth was a *mystery*. The more you think about it, the more thrilling and romantic it gets.

Transfer that distinction to the revelation of God, hidden for long ages but now disclosed. If it's a secret, the whole of humankind's history with God is in danger of sounding like some kind of manipulative game. God loves us but keeps the full extent of that love hidden. God loves us fully in Jesus but even then Jesus is only revealed to those in Galilee and Jerusalem. That leaves every other part of the world and every other century of existence untouched. It's a big responsibility to leave to others.

Why does God keep it all such a big secret? What kind of a game is God playing with us? When things go wrong in our lives, we ask God, "Why?" Maybe what we're really saying is, "Come on, God, isn't it about time you let us into the secret?" And quickly all the negative associations of secrecy cluster in. It's like God is leading us on a merry dance and we don't know the steps.

Around 20 years ago, when I was fit and hearty and liked to take trips to the mountains and hike all day and come down for a big meal and drive home, I arranged to meet a friend in a youth hostel, near the start of a lengthy mountain trail. I drove two hours to find the hostel, and was proud of myself for arriving pretty much on time. I was all set for the hike – but when I wandered around the hostel looking for my friend, I couldn't find him. I sat down to wait. Now you have to understand that these events took place in an era before the cell phone, which I realize is the land that time forgot. I had no way to find out where my friend was or why he was late.

After an hour I'd gone through my full range of responses, being first irritated by his tardiness, then bothered by the reduction in our walking time, next anxious that I'd misremembered our rendezvous location, and finally full of nightmares that he'd had some terrible mishap or disaster en route. Whereupon I saw him sauntering towards the sink in the hallway to get a cup of water. "Where were you?" we both said, with a studied mixture of concern, defensiveness, and anger. It turned out the hostel had an upstairs, which I hadn't discovered and where I hadn't thought to look. He'd been waiting there all along.

All that time he was upstairs, and I was downstairs. We could have spent all day in incomprehension and confusion. Think again about our resentment at God for making everything a big secret. It feels like God's upstairs and we're downstairs and we've no idea why God has to make it all so difficult. It's hard enough to trust that God's really with us at all. To think that God's just stringing us along undermines what little trust we have.

But the moment my friend came down the stairs – came into the world that I was aware of – everything changed. And so it is with Jesus. The moment he comes into the world, what was hidden for long ages is disclosed, the hints of hope become a revelation of grace; the secret becomes a mystery. We don't know the steps to the dance, but we're glad to be carried along and we lose sight of time and space in the whirl of glory.

Let's look more closely at what it means for a secret to turn into a mystery. We've talked about what a secret feels like. Here's what a mystery feels like. The film *Awakenings* tells the story of an epidemic of sleeping sickness that sweeps New York in the 1920s. A series of children enter a catatonic state and are taken into hospital in the Bronx where they are cared for. They spend the next 40 years there. While they can be engaged through certain actions such as careful touch or catching a ball, they have no life experience outside the hospital.

But in the 1960s a psychiatrist who has experience using drugs to address Parkinson's Disease tries out a new drug on one of these unusual patients, who are by now in their fifties. The film portrays how first one, and eventually all of the patients emerge from a comatose state to discover a world that has changed beyond recognition and has not waited for them. The story turns out to be a tragedy. The drug's effects are not permanent, and, after a few months of recognition and discovery, each patient subsides back into a catatonic condition.

But before tragedy takes hold, we see images of profound grace. In an astonishing scene, one patient, Leonard, comes round from his catatonic state and wakes up. He slowly begins to comprehend that he's been asleep for 40 years. He then becomes aware of a woman in his line of sight, bending over him. He dimly perceives that this woman is his mother.

And then the mystery begins truly to unfold. He realizes, and we realize with him, that this woman has remained faithfully with him throughout this almost unimaginable 40-year period. She has come back and shown up, day after day, year after year, with very few signs of life or hope, until this precious moment when he has finally awakened. This is the mystery. What wondrous love is this, that could continue to appear and be present and be beside this man for more than half a lifetime, for 15,000 days?

This is the depth of a mystery, that the more you get to know of the story, the more absorbing and awesome and astonishing it is. And this is the mystery of God. God's not hanging around upstairs, too busy or absent-minded to recognize that we're downstairs, waiting, aching, needy and exasperated. God's at our bedside, attending to our every gesture, seeking life in our every breath, longing for us to wake up and receive the life and love that is shaped to be with us.

The good news of Christmas is that God isn't keeping secrets from us. God isn't playing games with us, all so on the last day there can be a drumroll and God can say, "Surprise!" and we find out what it all meant all along. God has revealed the truth at the heart of the universe. Here is a fragile, naked human being, with no pockets, no place to hide anything, as vulnerable and in need of relationship as you and me. And this person is God. That's not a secret. That's a mystery. The more you look at it, the closer you get to it, the more absorbing and awesome and astonishing it is.

At Christmas God gives us a choice: to continue to see truth as a secret, or to allow ourselves to enter with Jesus the realm of mystery, what we call the kingdom of God. Which will it be for you this Christmas? Will you see God as a secret, evoking suspicion, resentment, and exasperation? Or will you open your eyes to see the kingdom?

God has come downstairs. God is waiting patiently beside your bed for years, decades, your whole life, as long as it takes, till you wake up. Jesus turns the secret into a mystery. Will you let yourself be engulfed by that mystery, and be absorbed by that awesome presence – and be lost in the dance of love with God forever?