

The Ties That Bind

Sherlock Holmes is that famous English detective who's known for always getting to the bottom of every mystery.

With a keen eye, he wants answers, not wonder, he wants evidence, not imagination.

His job is to solve every mystery brought to him, and to lay out his findings with a rational and sensible explanation.

Many of us love folks like Sherlock Holmes because we're dying to know the reasons for the many mysteries of life that often seem to defy explanation.

Not only the mysteries swirling around in our private lives, but the big cosmic questions too, like:

Why are we here?

Why did she die so young?

How can people be so cruel to one another?

The list of course is endless.

It's why books like the Left Behind series are so popular, those graphic and gory novels about Jesus coming back as a kind of heavenly Terminator.

It's why crazy people have no trouble rounding up followers to drink poisoned kool-aid or join a cult awaiting the last days.

It's what's at the root of so many conspiracy theories that seem to run rampant these days: from the fiction of massive voter fraud when the

results aren't to one's liking — all the way to those secret cabals that supposedly run the world.

We long to know why things are the way things are, and we prefer the answers to be neat and tidy.

And this need to know that there is in fact structure and form and common sense answers can sometimes feel overwhelming, especially when we live in uncertain times, times like these.

The disciples of Jesus are no different.

They are living under the thumb of Rome.

At the time Mark's gospel is written, the war of the Jewish people against Rome is in full swing, and the Temple, if it isn't destroyed by the time Mark finishes her gospel, well, it will be soon.

Then, as now, there are wars and rumors of wars; danger, famine and calamity.

Then, as now, people want to know how and why and when it will end.

So today, they put that big question to Jesus:

"Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?"

They want to know about "endings" — which many folks say is the very meaning of the word "apocalypse."

But Jesus, as he so often does, changes the focus of their questions away from self-obsessed worries and toward seeing God in an entirely new light.

Because the apostles, like us, often think of God as a giant engineer who has a very specific blueprint, a very precise design, for all of creation, where everything is mapped out and planned for some grand finale.

The apostles, like us, long for a time when the good get their just desserts, and the bad their punishment, when we are all given the long hoped for explanation about life's tragedies that have befallen us.

The apostles, like us, have a sense that our existence is nothing more than a three-tiered reality: this life on earth, followed by heaven for the good folks above and hell for the bad folks below.

God, sitting in his heaven (and it is HIS heaven from this point of view!) becomes for us simply a larger version of Sherlock Holmes, who will one day wrap it all up and hand us the answers to all of life's mysteries: and we will at long last be satisfied because everything will be rationally, sensibly and logically explained.

Perhaps we think that way because if we were God, and we had a universe to run, why, that's what we'd do!

But Jesus seems to be saying that God is actually not like that at all.

Whether he's eating with untouchables or healing the unworthy or confronting the religious fat cats in their Cadillacs, over and over Jesus seems to be saying that God isn't like the Chief Engineer of General Electric, but that God, who made humanity in God's image, male and female (and yes, gay and trans and Q), that God is more like Picasso, more like Monet.

That God is less like a stiff and predictable control freak and more like an eccentric, wild, some might even say crazy, artist, who, rather than forcing reality to meet her expectations — embraces, even dances with, every reality that we find ourselves in.

And in that embrace, in that dance, God helps us to see that there is no predetermined end, no set conclusion, no neat box of explanation – but rather all that is unfolds in mystery and joy and pain and sorrow and laughter and peace and wonder as we all together move ever so slowly, yet ever so surely, into the as yet undiscovered country, a country Jesus calls “the Kingdom of God.”

“Don’t waste your time trying to figure out when or if there is a final wrap up,” Jesus tells his friends today, “but live into this new life where invisible mustard seeds become huge trees, where specs of yeast create oodles of bread, where enemies become friends, where the dead in spirit are raised to new life!”

“Don’t look up for your answers,” he says, “but look around, look within.....”

There’s an old cartoon showing a man staring into the sky.

Another fellow wanders by and asks “What are you doing?”

“I’m waiting for Jesus to come back.”

“But that’s silly; you don’t need to stare into space to find him,” replies the other man.

“You can find him in ordinary life, in loving your neighbor, in doing good to those who hate you, in suffering for the truth.”

The man replies: “Did you say ‘suffering for the truth?’”

The man goes back to gazing into the sky.....

“This is way more comfortable!” he says. Garland, *The New Application Commentary*, 310, citing J. Feiffer.

Perhaps what Jesus is saying today is that when we gaze up at the clouds expecting Jesus to return, we are relying on Sherlock Holmes' solution to the mystery of life, and when we do, we run the risk of missing the very thing we seek.

The purpose of our life isn't to muddle through in the hope of someday having all of the muddle explained and rationalized and justified.

The muddle, in a strange, yet beautiful way, IS our life, and it is God's life too.

It's in the muddle where we are invited to learn about and live with compassion and kindness and gentleness.

And that happens as we slowly come to see that the muddle IS the miracle of creation, in which it's not only God who is the artist, but you and me, and every other person ... and forest and bird – and every created thing too!

Our purpose is to join with the Creator in bringing to fullness a creation that is not yet complete, still groaning for wholeness, still overflowing with dreams, with hope, with joy.

Which is why the word "apocalypse," despite rumors to the contrary, doesn't mean "endings."

It means – "unveiling."

Which is why the calamities of our lives are not, in the end, disasters.

They are, in the end, the pains that always come with new birth, new life, new beginnings.

What Sherlock Holmes eventually comes to see is that his obsession with answers and evidence, with every mystery neatly wrapped up, is a fools

errand, because it only wades into the shallows of what it is to be human.

What old Sherlock comes to see at the end of his long life is that answers and evidence are no match for the depths of joy that wonder and imagination give birth to.

Because wonder and imagination, that is, our hopes, our longings, our compassion, our ability to see beyond the way things merely appear to be; these are the ties that bind us, yes, to one another, but even more so, to God.

+amen.