

SECRET & HIDDEN

I Corinthians 2:1-16

A sermon by Katy Halliburton
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Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny. "For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ. -1 Corinthians 2:14-16

How would you proclaim the mystery of God? How would you tell someone else how to proclaim the mystery of God? The apostle Paul is attempting these lofty goals, without lofty words. Perhaps, without words at all.

Paul begins, *"When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom."* Paul is a preacher telling other preachers how to preach. And I, Katy, have come to you, already admonished by Paul. For you see, I have been a writer, and lofty words are easier. I am sucker for description, and multi-syllable words that roll around in my mouth. A writer, John Daniel said it best, "Simplicity? I resist. I like this language, language, phrases and images tumbling through me....I know there's truer knowing, simpler, deeper than words. Yet how but by words can I find it?" How do I, preach to you without words?

Paul continues, *"For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified."* And I get this. For what other words are as important to speak, to write? In my life, I could tell you many of my own stories, but without the Christ story, you would still not know me. Yet, how do I tell you a story without words? How does one tell the Christ story without words?

Paul says, *"And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling."* And this I get. It is an easy feeling for a preacher to have. Our congregation literally cooed when Rev. Broadbent said we were worshiping in Shove Chapel. He did not have to say where, "Shove," was, because the prestige of this college and the magnificence of this place was understood. The pulpit is high enough to be afraid of, even if you are not afraid of heights. Likewise, to follow a preacher getting his doctorate in preaching, and another whose hands alone can both make bowls sing, as well as hold the prayers of its people, is also rather intimidating. As are you, a congregation I admire, as you continually speak truth and justice. Unfortunately, I think I am wrong again. Paul does not have stage fright on account of the Corinthians, as I might have in coming before you in this place, but rather, Paul has God fright.

Paul has literally seen the God of whom he is speaking, and maybe that is why he can't use words. He says, *"My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom, but on the power of God."* And I guess, if I tried to tell you about the God I have seen, I too would be unable to use words. Maybe you know the same feeling, if you believe in Christ, your faith probably didn't come from the words in a history book. I'm guessing it was something a little less logical, and a little more magical, something Spirit filled, something transcendent. Yet, how but by words can we describe it? You would not be the first theologian to have tried.

"Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish." Paul says. And I get this too. The mature who speak wisdom may not be the published, the writers, the readers, the powerful, the politicians, or even the preachers. "A desk is a dangerous place from which to view the world," John le Carre once said. And likewise, a desk is a dangerous place from which to view Christ's world. How does one be humble from a desk? How does one listen to what the children are teaching from a desk? How does one serve from a desk? How does one celebrate from a desk? How does one follow from a desk? How does one witness crucifixion from a desk? The wisdom of this age is to be turned upside down, just as Christ did in his age. Do we know better than Christ, and choose not to have our world overturned? If so, are we also following the faulty rulers of Christ's age, and our own, into false power, false knowledge, and false wisdom? If so, it seems we took the easier route, and must ask Paul, how do we live otherwise?

"We speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory." Paul replies cryptically. Paul, knows the secret, and has seen the hidden Christ, and is not sharing with words. This time, I don't get it. How Paul, am I, are we, supposed to speak God's wisdom, if it is secret and hidden, and was only shared before we were born? Paul says, *"None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."* Paul, I am, we are still trying to understand you. Are you saying the ways in which we rule with the power and knowledge of this age, are the ways in which we crucify the Lord? Tell me, tell us, the secret Paul. We, like the Corinthians, are gathered because we believe, and we want to grow. We don't want to crucify the Lord. We only know not how to speak God's wisdom, without the words and knowledge of this age.

Paul responds,

But, as it is written,

*"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the human heart conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him"*

Now I understand a little bit more. I can read what is written in scripture from my desk. Yet there is more than reading to which Paul speaks. With scripture Paul is able

to speak of that which we can neither see, nor hear, nor conceive. Paul is pointing to that which only God can prepare, for those who love him. I have felt moments of love in my life which God has prepared. Do you know those moments? Do you have your own?

Where you see nothing but the fragile dust on a butterfly's wing, it's yellow orange imbuing in you a glowing fire of Pentecost?

Moments where you hear nothing but the sound of bells ringing down the sidewalk, like a multitude of heavenly hosts over a meek manger, moments where you stood in a garden, praying, feeling, forsaken and alone, and you cried out, and from above an answer came down, even if it was not the one you wanted, moments where you conceive nothing but the wind that enters in by three strikes on a singing bowl, and you shudder as if you have seen the promise carried by a gentle dove.

Ah, I have resorted to words. I apologize. They do not hold. What God has prepared is beyond my words. It is trying to describe love, *for those who love him.* Impossible. We must live it instead. The secret is, we must live love. We must take the wise, and sit them at a child's feet in a temple. We must preach a hard word to our hometown, we must weep with friends when their family has been in the tomb three days, We must put down the first stone and instead draw in the sand, as if child's play was a vision of power. We must take a king, and have him ride on a donkey, We must sit on a mountain and silently pray when all the world is a bustle, We must live love as if all we knew was Christ and him crucified.

Paul tell us, "These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God." Like a messenger, I imagine the Spirit floating through God's deep body, gathering what there is to know, and holding it close, until she exudes the wordless messages - that we might know them somewhere deep inside ourselves. *"For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God.* This unknowing, and knowing God, is the reason I pray before I preach, "Lord let this not be about me, but about you. May I speak your words, or rather, may I return to you, and your people, the love you have shown to me, through Christ and him crucified. May I proclaim your mystery." It is a prayer of humble praise, like preaching in this high pulpit from my knees and head bowed in fear and trembling.

There is prayer for you, the hearer, too. Paul says, *"Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God."* It is also a humble prayer. It is a prayer that gives up what is easier to know - the Spirit of this world, for something which can not even be described - the Spirit that is from God. It is a prayer that in its saying, says good-bye to words, to language, to phrases and images tumbling through you, good-bye to wisdom, and knowledge, and being a ruler of this age. It is a prayer that recognizes the Spirit within, it is a prayer that asks for understanding, it is a prayer that acknowledges gifts that look upside down to this world, and these words.

“Let us speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.”

Let us speak spiritually, Let us watch the bread be broken, and wine offered. Let us know Christ, and him crucified, and let us recognize him when he comes again. Let us go down to the waters, and insist that someone greater is to come, and let us rise from the waters, and hear God calling us God's own. Let us always begin in prayer, that the Spirit might move.

Did you hear the singing bowl? Or is it like the reindeer's bell held by a small boy traveling on *The Polar Express*? You recall, that as his friends grew older, as they 'grew up' in our foolish formulation, fewer and fewer could hear the bell ring. Fewer and fewer kept the spirit of that magical journey alive.

“Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” What has become foolish in this age? What indescribable moments do you leave you wishing to proclaim the mystery of God's love? *Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny.* To them are made real the fires at Pentecost, the multitude of heavenly hosts, and the gentle dove. The Spirit has shown them the depths of God. They sing, “Hosanna,” to a man on a donkey. They break open a jar of costly perfume to wash his feet. They deny him three times before he is crucified, and they are already forgiven. They run from the tomb, both in fear, and trembling, and in great joy. They appear blinded on the road to Emmaus, forever changed. They speak to you now. They are your speech, that comes not in lofty words.

“For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” Paul still challenges our worldly wisdom.

“No one,” I reply. No one can instruct the Lord. But we can proclaim the mystery because *we have the mind of Christ.*

Thanks be to God!