

Proper 11 / 5 Trinity Year C – St Helen's, Abingdon  
20 July 2025



Gen 18:1–14a / Psalm 15 / Colossians 1:1.15–28 / Luke 10:38–42

The mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations  
but has now been revealed to his saints.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – *Amen*

**I**N CASE SOMEBODY CAME HERE THIS MORNING thinking that they knew all about God's ways, that they had this 'God' character all sussed out, 'in their pocket' as you might say, Scripture gives us three readings to remind us that the God we come here to worship this morning can read your mind, jump ahead of your expectations, turn the do just the opposite of what you anticipated, pick your pocket and make you pregnant—and be back before you reckoned God was even busy. When God says, 'Look! It's Halley's Comet!' you just have to look, and God will swoop in and leave you with a surprise every time.

The Letter to the Colossians states it simply: God has a word, a mystery, lurking up their divine sleeve, and even though the letter says that *now* we know, *now* we understand, our understanding must amount to little more than a *glimpse* of the profound enigma at God's heart. The gospel mystery doesn't give us an *ultimate answer*, the sort of key to life for which people allegedly climb high into the mountains to ask a Himalayan lama; instead, the message that we teach everyone in all spiritual wisdom is that we can always rely on this God. We're just not quite certain *what* we can rely on God to *do*.

Abraham and Sarah knew they could count on God, I suppose. Sarah

thought she had figured out how the promise worked. She had bit her lip, and turned the other way; she sent Abraham in to Hagar's tent, and all together the three of them raised Hagar's son Ishmael as Abraham's heir. And then one noontime, Abraham cooling his heels in the tent, God shows up uninvited for high tea, and don't spare the fatted calf! You will understand that Abraham is caught off guard; *you* surely don't anticipate moseying to answer the doorbell and encountering the All-Holy Trinity On High waltzing in the door and asking what's for dinner. No more did Sarah foresee that her impromptu bake-off would end with God solemnly announcing that she was expecting. In the time of one spur-of-the-moment reception, the plan Sarah and Abraham had devised to shore up God's promises went all omnishambles. And although it must be something of a no-brainer to say it's unwise to laugh at God, when you get right down to it, what else can you do? When you have to cope with an All-Possible Deity, when God *tears into* your life with the mysterious, with the — pardon my saying it — with the *inconceivable* power that squeezes matter out of emptiness, that wrings time out of eternity, when you learn that ninety years of childlessness will climax with you and your wizened old spouse having a new arrival in nine months, DeBrett's may indicate that it's impolite to guffaw with expostulations of dismay; but what can you do except laugh?

Might have been a good thing for poor Martha to take a load off her indignation and laugh, too. She understood what Jesus was about; she was following the story closely. Why, the *very verse before* Jesus enters Martha's house, he tells a lawyer that fulfilling the commandments means taking care of people, and Jesus commands him to consider *everyone* his neighbour, *everyone* worthy of his solicitous attention. So Martha picks up her cue, and *she* prompts Jesus to repeat chapter 10, verse 37, for her sister Mary: 'Go and do likewise.' It was only three

verses ago! But as the words are leaving Martha's mouth, Jesus jumps *ahead* to chapter 11, verse 3, the verse in the Lord's Prayer where we ask *God* to give us this day our daily bread, and he leaves Martha holding the hors d'oeuvres tray feeling silly.

I should at this point intercede on God's behalf, not that God needs an attorney for the defence, and remind everyone here that God doesn't issue these revelations as a sort of cruel mockery; God, even more than the righteous person of our morning psalm,

...speaks the truth from the heart and bears no deceit on the tongue;  
...does no evil to a friend and pours no scorn on a neighbour...

In both of our stories this morning, the surprise isn't that Abraham and Sarah, Martha and Mary, slip on theological banana peels and fall on their assumptions. For Isaac's parents and for Lazarus's sisters, God's surprise brings a *richer array* of blessings than they had ever considered possible. Can a nonagenarian couple bear a son? Is it appropriate for a woman, indeed a *single* woman, to sit *alone* at the feet of a religious teacher? In response, Jesus speaks to our hearts and says, 'Church, *church*, is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At a set time I shall return to you, and you shall understand.'

I want to make this fully known to you, sisters and brothers: in Christ all the promises of God are 'yes' for us, in Christ all the *surprises* are *abundance*, in Christ all the *fullness of the glory of God* redounds to our *benefit*. Jesus makes known the heart of the mystery of God's identity: that God is the *blessor*, the *extender*, the *up-lifter*. In the mysterious plot line of God's story, where we're the rag-tag odd lot of characters struggling to pick up the clues and to guess, better, better, how the next chapter will go, the preceding chapters never get left behind, but God's great story sweeps them along with us, with new

hopes, new promises. God teaches us the art of extemporaneous discipleship by leading us, as a good choir director, through the spontaneous beauty of improvised melodies, building revelatory harmonies, guiding us from mistaken ways to vibrant life, *together*.

If it were not so, how could we Gentiles presume to hope for the riches of God's glory? God does no wrong to Sarah and Abraham's children; God has sworn an oath to them, and God will not, ever, take back that covenant. And of what worth would our heavenly riches be, if they came to us by defrauding God's people Israel? No, God's faithfulness *amplifies, intensifies* that glory by bringing a bunch of no-account Gentiles who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, into a world of blessing that we aren't quite ready for. This is the mystery—and jump aboard *now*, so that by the time this train gets to its destination we may have had a chance to grow in wisdom and understanding, so our apostles can present us mature in Christ!

Now, I am sympathetic to Martha; I'm no Mr. Good Housekeeping, but I know how frustrating it feels to bear what seems like an undue proportion of the hard graft. (Margaret would never let me get away without putting in a good word for Martha; after all, *someone* has to make the meals.) And I know I'm sympathetic to Sarah and Abraham; I'm not yet *quite* ninety years old, and still I'd have a hard time handling another boy-child at this point in my life. I can explain, at length, why my particular gifts and capacities serve God best by sitting at Jesus' feet and listening, by growing into a graceful old age unencumbered by infants and (Lord have mercy) teenagers.

Yet the suffering of the body of Christ, which is the church, comprises an ingredient, perhaps even a *necessary* ingredient in the extension of God's promises from one family, to a nation, to all the people of the earth, to all living creatures, to the groaning creation itself. Stretching *hurts*; even God's blessings can sting and ache when

they come as surprises.

So *I'd* better watch out, and *you'd* better watch out. A mysterious God has prepared for us puzzling blessings 'round every corner; I hear a baby crying, and — if you'll excuse me — I think dinner may be burning.



In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit —

***Amen***