

There is a time for secrets. And there is a time for revelation. Advent is a season for both. This is when we prepare for Christmas. We conspire in hushed whispers about the presents we intend to buy. We sneak away to the stores. We order things online. Then we hide them in some dark corner of the house. We conceal them again with beautiful wrapping paper. We tuck them safely away under the tree. Then we wait and wonder.

And eventually, Christmas Eve or Christmas Day arrives—maybe even St. Stephen’s Day. And all secrets are revealed. We watch our loved ones tear into their presents with nervous anticipation. Is this the right gift? Will we get the right reaction? The revelation of the actual gift brings a response—joy—laughter—or maybe even carefully disguised disappointment. Even so, hopefully the revelation of what is under that paper leaves us appreciating the giver more than the gift.

The Gospel writers—Matthew and Luke—give us very satisfying Christmas revelations in their accounts of the nativity. In Luke, we learn about the heavenly band of angels that appear to the shepherds. They announce the birth of the Messiah. They identify where the Child can be found. The shepherds go and see the revelation for themselves.

And following this divine encounter, “the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.” It is the right response.

In Matthew’s Gospel—as we heard on Sunday—an angel visits Joseph. He goes from one surprise to another—from pain to glory. And if we keep reading in Matthew, the bright Epiphany star reveals this Child to the Magi. The role of the Magi reveals the purposes of God from the beginning. Israel was to be a kingdom of priests—a light to the nations.

And now, Israel has been reduced to one tiny Child. The light of Christ comes to the Gentiles. The secret is getting out. And Matthew tells us that they were overwhelmed with joy upon encountering Jesus Christ, the Newborn King. Throughout, we find these grand revelations—good news of great joy for all the people.

But we have focused on Mark’s Gospel this Advent. And here, the revelation of the Messiah—especially the incarnation and the nativity—is not quite so straightforward. There are moments, of course. The opening verse comes to mind. “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

Yet, there is also something of a messianic secret in Mark. We see a Messiah who conceals His identity. As we will sing in the days to come, “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see.” And as Paul will say, He is veiled to those who are perishing.

Even as Jesus goes about performing the signs of the kingdom—the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them—Jesus is also trying to keep His identity secret. He constantly tells people who know something of what He is doing, to keep it to themselves.

When He heals a leper, and a deaf man, and raises a little girl from the dead, He instructs them all to tell no one. Jesus asks His disciples who they think He is. Peter responds, “You are the Christ.” Immediately, Mark reports, “He strictly charged them to tell no one about him.” This probably seems quite odd to our ears.

But, we hear it again in our Gospel reading. This is typically the reading that we hear at Transfiguration at the end of the Epiphany season. And of all texts, this one most closely matches the otherworldly glory that we see in Luke 2 as the angels visit the shepherds out in the fields.

Here, Jesus appears in all of His glory. Only Peter, James, and John witness this revelation. Jesus is seen with Moses and Elijah—the Law and the Prophet. A cloud overshadows this moment, just like at Sinai. Both Moses and Elijah had spent time at Sinai meeting with God in a display of revelation glory. And now Jesus walks among the Three. This is something worth talking about.

But the glory is fleeting. It lasts just a moment. And after it had diminished, Mark tells us, “As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus (once again) charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.” Jesus conceals His identity. The messianic secret continues.

It makes me wonder how they did. Many of us have a hard time keeping secrets about the gifts we bought. Others sneak around the house looking for presents. Were they actually able to keep silent about this encounter—with the other disciples—with their family members?

Some secrets are meant to be saved for later. And Jesus gives us clues about this timing. Earlier, in Mark 4, Jesus explains the Parable of the Sower. The disciples don’t get it. The parables serve to veil the truth from those looking for excuses to reject Him. But they ask Him to explain. And good for them.

But in the end, Jesus says, “For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.”

Jesus kept His identity hidden—as much as possible—because it was not yet the right time to share it. Timing matters in the Gospels. And several suggestions have been made for the nature of and reason for this secret. Some say that He is employing reverse psychology. And generally, His call for silence is largely ineffective, as the crowds cannot help but talk about what Jesus has done. The Word gets out. Some say this is what Jesus wanted in the first place.

However, there is another potential reason. And this one is more compelling. It is likely that a premature revelation of Jesus as the Christ could have led to Jesus being coopted in the great struggle for power in first century Palestine. We have heard of these factions. Zealots, Essenes, Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, Romans. And with what we know of Jesus, He was not there to do their bidding.

Even the Twelve had some wrong expectations of the Messiah. Remember the last thing they say to Jesus before the Ascension, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” If the story of the Transfiguration had been spread abroad—if His identity as the Christ was known—these misguided expectations could have been fanned into flame causing a great deal of harm.

That seems to be Jesus’ purpose here with the messianic secret. Until Jesus’ character and mission had been fully revealed—such as with His passion predictions—with His death and resurrection—His identity is to be concealed.

And thus, He kept His identity hidden from the outside world. The lips of the chosen witnesses were sealed regarding this revelation. Even they still had fanciful and extravagant political ideals for Him. And yet, the Transfiguration—and what went with it—took place as part of the great foundation of the faith. It established the fact that Jesus is the Son of God by withdrawing the veil from His divine glory.

At this event—and for just a moment—He who would die and rise again for our redemption—who came to this earth in such great humility—let His divine majesty and glory—which belonged to Him from eternity—shine through His humanity. And just like at His Baptism, the Father sealed the scene with His personal blessing. And these three witnesses got to see it all.

So, even though the messianic secret appears throughout Mark's Gospel, there are, in fact, three clear moments when Mark reveals Jesus' true identity. The Transfiguration is such a moment. Although—again—only the three disciples are present for this revelation. And notice that Jesus reveals the cross and resurrection to the Three in this context.

But in addition—as I just suggested—at Jesus' Baptism—in glory reminiscent of the nativity—the heavens are torn open. The Spirit descends. And the Father's voice heralds, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." Although... Jesus does escape the public eye for a while thereafter. He is sent by the Spirit into the wilderness for forty days after this affair.

And as I have been suggesting, for Mark, the most significant moment of revelation comes at the very end. Mark's whole gospel has been building to the passion—this climactic moment when Jesus is lifted up upon the cross. "The cross He bore, for me, for you." And with His death and resurrection for us sinners, the messianic secret is now lifted.

As Mark concludes His Gospel—in chapter sixteen—Jesus now says, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." It is after His resurrection—really after His Ascension—that the good news of Jesus' coming was to be made known. The disciples will finally understand. And at this point, Christ is preached. He will be preached for the rest of the church age. And we are to make His name know too.

There are secrets in the Scriptures—mysteries. Both Daniel in his prophecy and John in the Revelation are given visions that they are to keep to themselves—sealed until the end. We don't get to peer into such things. This is the experience of the Prophets and the Apostles alone. But generally, the secrets of Scripture are intended to be revealed to the world—to all who will believe.

Maybe Paul says it best in his benediction in Romans 16, "Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen."

Now, in many ways, Jesus is still hidden today. And maybe we can see this best in the Time of Christmas—Advent, Christmas, Epiphany. The light of the world has come. Christ

the Savior is born. His purposes for us have been laid out. And we herald such things around here.

But for most, Christmas has nothing to do with Christ. Life has nothing to do with Christ. There are so many things that draw our gaze away. Even some of the good things of this season can keep us from thinking of Christ—from listening to Christ. We confuse the gifts with the Giver.

And, of course, Christ does still come to us in hidden ways. It all may seem so ordinary. And it clashes with modern sensibilities. He is easy for people to miss—if that is what they really want to do.

A leather-bound book. A simple meal of bread and wine. A group of followers—braving the icy cold night—holding candles Christmas Eve. The glory is there. But it takes special kinds of eyes to see. It takes new ears to hear. A regenerated heart to believe.

So, let's look for Christ in this Advent season. Let's delve into the messianic secret. And let's know Him for what He is. With the incarnation and nativity—with the cross and resurrection—He is revealed to us. Pay attention to the revelation. Ponder it in your heart like Mary does at the nativity.

The glory has come to us. Christ is revealed. We see hints of it—even in Mark's messianic secret. Mark may not have given us exactly what we were looking for. But He does tell us why Jesus comes. He tells us who Jesus is. And he calls us to kneel before the One who is born Savior of the world. "And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only." May our eyes be fixed on Him alone as well. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

*+Soli Deo Gloria+*