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Honoring The Mystery

Edward R. Sims, D.D.

Albert Einstein once wrote, "The most beautiful feeling one can have is a sense of the mysterious." I return again and again to that subtle proclamation of the essential mystery of God recorded in the thirty-third chapter of the Book of Exodus. God has promised that his presence will go with Moses in his leadership of God's people, and Moses is pressing for reassurance of God's fidelity.

And the Lord said to Moses, "This very thing that you have spoken I will do: for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name." Moses said, "I pray thee, show me thy glory." And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you my name, 'The Lord'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But, he said, "you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live." And the Lord said, "Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand upon the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft in the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

Moses' hunger for certainty is easy to understand. We all know the yearning for certainty in the face of risk and the experience of hesitation as we confront important decisions. The story of our departure from Eden is right on point: God clothes us against the cold, conducts us to the border of Eden and withdraws his immediate presence from us. We have chosen freedom: God will neither intimidate us nor relieve us of our responsibility. Furthermore, he inspired the Biblical writers to give him a name which points to his existence but says nothing of his nature. That name "Jahweh" — "I am" — is a declaration of the bedrock reality of God's existence, it is not a definition of his being. That name proclaims that God IS; it does not describe his nature. The name enshrines the mystery of God: we can know him in our experience, but we cannot define him in our language. This is a brave and an extraordinary religious achievement: boldly proclaiming God's presence; humbly accepting our limitations.

I want to share with you three contemporary expressions of the same religious experience: an encounter with a God eager to be known, but unwilling to be confined in human definitions. These three experiences share a critical common word: "something."

The first is a poem of Robert Frost's, known to many of you, I'm sure. It is called "Mending Wall" and it begins with the words, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." Frost describes how he meets his neighbor each spring on an appointed day, and walks with him along the wall

that separates their property, replacing as they go the stones that have fallen over the winter. The poet conjectures, as the two men walk together, that there is a force at work in human affairs which does not like separations between people, a force that would bring people together and cement their bonds. He muses that there is a grace in human affairs which seeks to heal the barriers that separate us from one another, something that doesn't love distances between people and seeks the healing of those distances. Something there is, the poet says, that doesn't love a wall.

In 1959, the British Broadcasting Corporation recorded a television interview with Carl Jung, the eminent Swiss psychiatrist, on *Face to Face*. Jung was a pioneer in that discipline and made marked departures from the physician who first defined the field, Sigmund Freud. In the course of the conversation, the interviewer asked, "Dr. Jung, do you believe in God?" Jung thought a moment and replied, "No, I don't believe in God — I know God." The interviewer was taken by surprise and responded, "How can you be so certain?" Dr. Jung answered, "Every now and then, something crosses my path."

Something crosses my path — an encounter with a reality we cannot quite pin down; a reality elusive, transient, resistant to analysis, to dissection. A contemporary Jewish theologian reports similar experiences of encounter that have both depth and authority and at the same time a certain elusive quality. These experiences lead him to make a more personal translation of the Hebrew name "Jahweh." In the place of "I am" he offers, "Oh, you again!" Something crosses my path.

Two years ago, I attended a conference on intuition — that experience of the appearance in our inner selves of a knowledge or an understanding or a certainty whose origin we cannot account for. On the final day of the conference, the principal lecturer of the week summarized all she had said about intuition in four words: "Something in us knows." Something in us knows.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall. Something crosses my path. Something in us knows.

We look out on a world of confusion and hatred, a world of warfare and destruction, abuse and exploitation. A world of tsunami, earthquake, hurricane — of poverty, oppression, hunger, disease. We lift our eyes to heaven and ask in desperation: Can there be beauty? Can there be meaning? Can there be goodness — and life — and truth? Can we believe? Can we love? Can we trust? Can we hope?

Something answers Yes.



Edward and Elizabeth Sims have lived for two decades in the seaside village of Rockport, Massachusetts, profoundly aware of the dedicated leadership of the Church Pension Fund and grateful for its canny investment strategies.