

EPIPHANY (OBSERVED) – JANUARY 9, 2022 – EPHESIANS 3:1-12

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

¹For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles-- ²assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. ⁴When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. ⁶This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. ⁷Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. ⁸To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, ¹⁰so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. ¹¹This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹²in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.

You can see why Paul's words were so scandalous, both to the Jews and to the Gentiles. The Gentiles couldn't understand why it was so easy, that salvation would come to them simply through believing the Good News of Christ's atoning sacrifice for all men. But, the Jews, too, were horrified. They believed what they had been taught, that they were the chosen people, that the Savior would come only for them, and certainly not these folks from the nations, that hadn't sacrificed anything like

the scale that the Jews had. We learn throughout the Gospel that the “stumbling block” that Paul speaks of to the Jews was that Jesus came to not only them and their descendants, but for all men. This was not fair! They were the children of Abraham, had never been in slavery to anyone, and to suggest that they were slaves to sin was blasphemy! Thus, most of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles, dismissed Paul out of hand. They did not believe in the Gospel message he was preaching; rather, they said it couldn’t possibly be true because they didn’t completely understand it.

We often do this in our lives. We are reluctant to believe in something that we believe is “too good to be true.” As experiencers of human nature, we know that there is no such thing as a free lunch. If we’re offered salvation, and told that there’s nothing that we can do to earn it, and nothing that we can do to contribute to it, we’re apt to say that it can’t be for real. That’s the reaction that was common in Paul’s day, and the same skepticism is true of our day and age. If someone comes up to us on the street and offers us a million dollars, we want to see the green of the cash before we’ll believe that this person is legit. And even then, we’ll probably do some investigating to make sure that the money isn’t stolen, or made in the person’s basement! This same reaction characterized the 1st century folks to whom Paul was preaching and teaching. Even though we now know that what Paul was telling them was 100% true, we can also understand why they would be reluctant to believe, because they were jaded from their own experiences.

Let’s follow a little bit the genesis of Paul’s argument, and how he came to be God’s ambassador to the Gentiles. Along the way, we’ll talk about a couple of important themes in our text that serve to give credence to what Paul is saying. Ultimately, it is God-pleasing that they and we believe in the truth of the Gospel, because it is the only way to salvation for us. There are many things in the Scriptures that are difficult to understand, much less believe. That’s why we call them mysteries – things we cannot explain, that we don’t know how they happen, but we believe them because we believe the chain of testimony from God to Paul’s pen to us today.

Paul is a prisoner for the Gospel; he is compelled to preach the Gospel; even though he might personally not have chosen this life, that is so counter-cultural, this Gospel is so important to him that there is nothing that will stand in the way of him being obedient to the will of God in Christ Jesus. That's what being a steward is all about – a faithful executor of orders given by others, administering the things that belong to someone else – not making decisions, not being in charge, but merely a doer of what someone else has directed them to do. When we talk about stewards, people tend to clutch their wallets, and think that I'm going to launch into a sermon trying to get people to give more money to the church – that's not the case today! Money is one way that we are stewards of God's grace, and support the work of His church – it's an important thing, but it's a subject for another day. What we're talking about here is the clear line of authority, from God Himself to Paul to the Gentiles of his day, and by extension, us today. Paul was being careful to be a faithful steward, doing what he was told to do, and not launching out on his own and inventing teachings out of whole cloth.

We don't own the mysteries of God – not me as a pastor, not you as the people of God, not even the hierarchy within our district and Synod – only God owns these mysteries. But, He makes us stewards of the mysteries of God – we are empowered, directed and set apart to preach the Word of God truly, and administer the Sacraments of God rightly. Paul, when he was given the Words of Institution to write in 1 Corinthians, said this very clearly – “What I have received, that I am passing along to you.” Paul wasn't being creative, he wasn't summarizing what Jesus said at the Last Supper – rather, he was speaking the words verbatim that Jesus said when He turned the bread and wine of the Passover meal also into His own body and blood, for the remission of our sins and the strengthening of our bodies and souls. Because we don't own the mysteries of God, we also can't change them as we see fit – we are charged to be faithful, doing that which our Savior did in the first place, and said at the inception.

Even if Paul wanted to turn his back, and stop being the herald and public face of the Gospel message to the Gentile people, he wasn't able – he was filled with such a heart, a concern, for those who were lost in their sins and their sinfulness, that he HAD to keep going. Let's face it – Paul was presented with a ton of obstacles to preaching the Gospel to the Gentile nations – in fact, there are many places where he lists out some of his “bona fides” for being known as one that had suffered for the Gospel of Christ which he bore. Shipwrecks, beatings, imprisonments – these were just some of the things that were inflicted on Paul, because he would not change or abandon the message about Christ and Him crucified as the ONLY way to get to heaven. Paul tells us that he was willing to go through this and more, for the greater goal of having some people repent of their sins and believe, by the Holy Spirit using him as His mouthpiece, His hands, His feet, His lips, etc. Paul wasn't alone in this suffering and persecution – indeed, all of the disciples except for John were martyred for the faith. We've talked about this with the Martyrdom of St. Stephen on the 1st Sunday after Christmas, as well as last week when the appointed Epistle reading was from 1 John chapter 4 – suffering is indeed a mark of the Christian faith. Even if we are having things be easy for us now, we are promised in Scripture that this will not be the case forever. As the days draw closer to the End Times, we are told that things will get more and more challenging for those who profess the Name of Christ, and those who strive to live the Christian life in a world that doesn't have the time of day for Him.

What was the mystery that Paul made known to the Gentiles? Why was it a mystery? When would it no longer be a mystery, but be fully explained? The mystery, in this context, is that the Gentiles and the Jews were equally intended by God for salvation – indeed, all mankind is loved by God, desired by Him to be in heaven, rescued by His life, death and resurrection from all sin, from death, and from the power of the devil. We'd like to think that we're the only ones that are going to be heaven – we'd like to think that we're somehow better than others – we tend to try to compare ourselves to others, rather than compare ourselves to God's righteous, perfect standard. We need to avoid asking the

question that got so many theologians in trouble – if God wills that all men be saved, then why are some saved and others not? We can't ask that question – it's beyond our understanding to get this answer. We know God's perfect will, and that it isn't perfectly done because of sin. That doesn't diminish His original love for us in Christ Jesus; it merely speaks of the depth of our rebellion against God.

It was a mystery for so long because it was kept from the Jews so that they would go through with the awful deed of punishing, beating, even killing our Savior. Think about it: if the people knew that they were crucifying the Lord of Life, who would have enough faith to go through with this and know that God could and would raise Christ from the dead. The natural thought that would go through the mind of a 1st century Jewish or Roman leader, if he believed in Christ as the Savior of the world – “I don't want to be the one that is responsible for this injustice.” But, Paul was the one that was named by God to be the one to reveal this mystery to the nations – to the Gentiles – not because he necessarily had the skill set above others to do so, but because the Holy Spirit gave him the discernment and the wisdom and skill and words to say.

That's what Epiphany is all about, by the way – making Christ known, to the nations, until the end of time. When the Wise Men journeyed to Bethlehem, and beheld the Christ-child, they left and told those whom they already knew and had relationships with about what they had heard and seen. They had been given much when it came to the Gospel – that Jesus was born, that He was the promised Messiah, that He would die and rise again for the sins of the world, that He came from God the Father and would return to God the Father after His work was done. They had a lot more information than we might think at the first, both to be compelled to make the journey to Bethlehem, but also after they arrived there, when they learned directly at the feet of the Savior Jesus. In the same way, Paul was given much when it came to the mysteries of God, but he, too, didn't understand everything that he was told. Especially in these things that he didn't understand, he passed on what he had been given to the

people, and let the Holy Spirit explain what needed explaining. The most important thing to Paul was to be faithful, because he was compelled to preach the unadulterated Gospel to the nations.

When the Wise Men left, they spread the Good News to those that they came into contact, that they already had relationships with. These folks were spread far and wide, way beyond Bethlehem and even the land of Judea and the Roman realm. They were the first evangelists of the Christian church – they spread what information they had been given, to the nations. Just like Paul, they were heralds so that folks would hear and believe the Good News. After all, how can someone believe if they have not been told? And how can they be told if there isn't a preacher to tell them? And how can there be a preacher if he isn't sent by God Himself? This might sound confusing, but it really isn't – the Scripture is clear that God has a plan, and He executes it among us by His power, impetus, and desire.

Historically, the festival of Epiphany has been somewhat of a mini-Mission Festival. The Day of Pentecost and Reformation Day also fit into this mold, but perhaps the Day of Epiphany is the most fitting. On this day we commemorate the coming of the Magi to the Christ-child in Bethlehem, being told the things they needed to know, and then returning to those whom they knew in their homes far away. Our Epistle reading also lauds the obedience, stewardship and faithfulness of St. Paul, with his peerless point that he pass along nothing but the mysteries of God in Christ Jesus, and shelve everything and anything that would detract from this purpose. Christ is born in Bethlehem – let us rejoice and be glad in it! Because He was born, and because He grew up and lived and died, our salvation has been accomplished. Thanks be to God for all that He has done for us. He has truly done everything for our salvation, totally out of His love, His grace, and His mercy. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.