

EPIPHANY - 2013 GOD'S MYSTERY REVEALED

Dear Friends in Christ,

Six weeks ago, Sunday, November 25, Christ the King Sunday, began like any other Sunday for me. It was one of the Sundays when I had no “official duties” to perform. Pastor Kassulke preached the sermon. Pastor Koehler was the liturgist. It was a non-communion Sunday. In fact, earlier in the morning, I had even entertained the thought of attending services in Vail on that day. Little did I know that you had a surprise in store for me. When the service ended, Bryan Guenther, the president of our congregation took the microphone and announced a special celebration for my 25 years in the ministry. You all really caught me by surprise that day! I was completely caught off guard, stunned and speechless. As I look back on that day, I think that perhaps the biggest surprise of all was that 500 people could keep a secret so well and for such a long time. I had absolutely no clue what you had planned.

Today we are going to hear about something that was a secret for a much longer period of time. Today we are going to hear about a mystery that was secret for two thousand years. From the 3rd chapter of the Apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we listen again to these verses:

⁴ In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. . . ⁸ Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. (NIV).

Today, January 6th, is the Day of Epiphany, and with today's service we begin the Epiphany Season of the Church Year. As was said earlier, Epiphany comes from a word that means to ‘make manifest’ or to ‘reveal.’ During the Epiphany Season our readings and our sermons will show how Jesus, the baby born in Bethlehem's stable, was revealed to be the Son of God and Savior of the world. Epiphany is often called the Gentile Christmas. In fact, in some parts of the Christian world presents are not exchanged on December 25th, but today on January 6th. The custom of exchanging gifts at Christmas is said to come from the account of the 3 Wisemen, the Magi from the East, who brought gifts to the baby Jesus. The Magi are closely associated with the day of Epiphany. They were the first Gentiles to whom it was *revealed* (epiphany) that Jesus is the Son of God. As far as we know, the Magi were the first Gentiles to worship Jesus as Lord and Savior, hence the term “Gentile Christmas.”

The word ‘mystery’ occurs four times in our reading from Ephesians 3. So just what is the “mystery” the Apostle Paul talks about in today's reading, the *“mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things”*? We read in verse 6: *This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.*

Imagine if you came here this morning and the greeters at the door said to you, “I'm sorry, you can't come in here. You're not a Jew, You need to be from the chosen race. You're just a Gentile dog.” I think most of you would turn around and leave and tell everybody else, “don't go to THAT church. They won't let you in!” For two thousand years, from Abraham until Jesus, that was the prevailing attitude of the Old Testament believers. “Gentiles are not allowed. Gentiles are the enemy. Gentiles KEEP OUT!”

This was not really God's attitude toward the Gentiles in those two thousand years from Abraham to Jesus. Yet God did look at the Gentiles as a danger to his chosen people. Gentiles are the Canaanites and the Assyrians and

the Philistines and the Babylonians and the Egyptians who were all actually referred to as the ENEMIES of God's people. When the Israelites entered the Promised Land, God wanted the Gentiles living there to be completely driven out or killed. He warned his people not to intermarry with Gentiles so they wouldn't be led astray by the Gentiles' religions. More often than not, the Jewish people referred to Gentiles as "goyim" or "uncircumcised people." When they used the word "goyim" they generally meant any non-Jew. Calling a group of people "goyim" was the same as calling them "a bunch of heathens."

This doesn't mean that God didn't care about the Gentiles or that God rejected the Gentiles. If you look up the word "alien" in the Old Testament, you will find law after law that showed great concern for the aliens (the non-Jews) living among the Jews. The laws even allowed Gentiles to participate in worship as long as they lived like a Jew.

Throughout the Old Testament, Gentiles were intertwined in the history of God's chosen people. Rahab the Canaanite from Jericho and her family were allowed to live with the Israelites. Rahab even became an ancestor of the Savior. The Moabite woman Ruth had a book of the Old Testament written about her life and she became the grandmother of King David. Jonah the Israelite, although at first reluctant, became a missionary to the Gentile city of Nineveh. However, these stories are few and far between. Throughout Old Testament history, the Gentiles were, more often than not, known as either aliens or enemies of the Jews. Instead of reaching out and going TO the Gentiles, the Gentiles were supposed to come to the LORD as they were attracted by the completely different lifestyle and by the completely different faith of the Jews.

Even when Jesus arrived, the attitude toward Gentiles didn't change much, at least not at first. Oh it started out promising. The Gentile Wise Men were some of the first people to come and see Jesus not the priests in the Jewish temple at Jerusalem. But when Jesus began his ministry, he preached primarily to the Jews. When the disciples found Jesus talking to a Samaritan woman, they were as surprised as she was. (John 4). When a Canaanite woman asked Jesus to heal her daughter, Jesus said to her, *"I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."* Matthew 15:24 (NIV). Even the disciples were sent out to go primarily to the Jews. All of the leaders of the early Christian Church were Jewish except for Timothy, who had a Gentile father, and Titus. In the Book of Acts, the history of the early church, it isn't until the later chapters that Gentiles become the target audience of the apostles.

Even then, listen to the response of the Jews when Paul told them he was to be a missionary to the Gentiles. We read in Acts 22: ²¹ *"Then the Lord said to me, 'Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'"* ²² *The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, "Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!"* Acts 22:21-22.

Even though a majority of the Jews in Paul's time didn't want to have anything to do with us Gentiles, here we are, worshiping the Jewish Messiah and following his words. Why do we do this? It's because the MYSTERY of this Jewish religion has been revealed to us. Paul wrote, ⁴ *In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ,* ⁵ *which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.* ⁶ *This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.*

The words in verse 6 are incredible. *Gentiles are heirs together with Israel.* In Old Testament times, Gentile believers could never really be considered equal to the Jews. As a Gentile, you could never hope to be chosen as a priest. You would never be considered at ONE with the Israelites because of your ancestry. The mystery revealed by God was that when Jesus came to earth and fulfilled the Law, that is, he kept it perfectly, without ever sinning, the barrier between Jew and Gentile no longer existed. In fact, none of the Jewish civil or ceremonial laws, circumcision, the Passover, the Day of Atonement, none of them were needed once Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead.

So Paul called Gentiles not only co-heirs and co-sharers in the promise, but co-members of ONE BODY. It doesn't matter what race you descended from. It doesn't matter what your last name is. It doesn't matter if your grandfather was baptized and confirmed in this church or you become a member this morning. The gospel lumps us all together under the title of "saved sinners". We are all covered under the same blood. When it comes to heaven, we've all got the same ticket through faith in Christ. The ticket says, "All believers in Jesus are admitted." In the book of Revelation the Apostle John describes not just a vision of Jews in heaven. Instead he says, *"After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. . . Revelation 7:9.*

God always had in mind to include us Gentiles in his plan of salvation. But that fact had been a secret, a mystery to all. It was so secret that Paul said, ¹⁰ *His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms,* ¹¹ *according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.* Even the angels, the rulers and authorities in the heavens, didn't realize God's whole plan to include the Gentiles until it all happened. As the angels saw how Paul was now reaching out to the Gentiles, they then realized how wise and loving and gracious God really is.

Since most of you grew up in the church, this may not seem like a big deal to you. But to Paul and to the Jews and Gentiles of his time this was huge! Paul wrote to the Gentile Christians, . . . *you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree. . . Romans 11:24* In other words, he was stressing to them how unnatural it was for them to be called children of Abraham, sharers of the Gospel, especially with their heathen background! So Paul warned them and said that the Jews, . . . *were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.* Romans 11:20-21.

Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. Arrogance comes before God and thinks, "God should be thankful that I'm here. God should appreciate the sacrifices I make in getting myself and my kids to church. I hope the church appreciates how much money I give. God needs me. He wouldn't dare cut me off. I'm just too important to Him." Fear says, "God, I don't deserve to be here. I was just a wild branch, growing out of control and condemned to die. Yet you brought me here in baptism, grafted me into your tree, and gave me the privilege of being called a Christian. You can make everything work without me. So I thank you for the privilege of being called a child of Abraham by faith, even though I'm not a Jew. I thank you for bringing me into your family of believers."

That was Paul's attitude toward His own ministry. He wrote, ⁸ *Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.* Instead of choosing one of his trusted believers and followers, God chose Paul, an enemy of Christ, a murderer of Christians, to go out and tell Gentiles about God's grace and about his love for them. Even though that preaching led Paul to being persecuted and imprisoned and executed, Paul looked at his call to the Gentiles as a privilege. He knew in his heart that he didn't deserve such a title as apostle, but God gave it to him anyway.

Sometimes when I invite people to church they say, "Oh, if I ever went to church the roof would cave in." or "If I ever went to church lightening would strike." What they're implying is that there's no way God would let them into church after all they've done. They don't think God would want them after they've been away so long. The truth is that no matter what you've done wrong, no matter how long you've been away, God still wants you here. He wants you to wash your robe in the blood of Christ and be cleansed, be forgiven for all sins. Verse 12, *In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.*

Like Paul, you too have been called. Even though you are a Gentile, even though you were born dead in sin, God called you to faith through your baptism. He called you to faith through the Gospel. You belong here, not because of what you've done, but because of what Christ has done for you. What a privilege it is for us to know

that we, once dirty, stinking goyim, are a part of God's plan of salvation, saved by God's grace like every other believer in Jesus.

Out of all of the people living in the world of Caesar Augustus, God could have chosen the priests in Jerusalem, or the faithful of Israel to come and worship the Christ after He was born in Bethlehem. Instead, God chose to reveal his Son to the Wise Men, the Magi, Gentiles who came from hundreds of miles away. They got to know about the Newborn King and they got to see the Newborn King before most of the Newborn King's fellow-countrymen in Israel. What did Mary and Joseph have in common with the wise men from the east? Not much. The Magi were rich. Mary and Joseph were poor. The Magi were well-educated, the scholars of their day. Mary and Joseph probably had little formal education. The wise men were Gentiles. Mary and Joseph were Jews. These were very different people. What brought them together? The Christchild, and what he would someday do.

One of the main messages of the Epiphany season is that we have a world-wide Savior. That no matter who you are, no matter what your background, no matter how different you think you are, God wants you to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. He brings you into a group of people called Christians, people who have all kinds of differences, but people who have one thing in common that binds us very closely together. That's the most important thing of all, the forgiveness of sins in Christ. God has revealed his grace to you. It's no longer a mystery. It's no longer a secret. It's yours to share. Amen.