

"The Mystery"

Text: Ephesians 3:1b-12

"May the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen." - 1 Peter 5:10-11

Dear Fellow-Inheritors of the Lord's goodness:

There are many rather strange and delicate tensions in the life of every Christian – opposing forces or extremes, between which the child of God must navigate. There is the struggle between communicating necessary and helpful information, on the one hand, and gossip on the other. There is the struggle between sharing good news about yourself and bragging; between charity and enabling sinful laziness; between mission work and sheep stealing, confidence and arrogance, rest and slothfulness. In all these areas (and countless others) we struggle for consistent balance.

This morning we must navigate yet another: the tension that will forever exist between Godly humility and an honest acceptance of the fact that our Creator God knows us by name and loves us. The Bible, of course, teaches both truths – the need for humility and the privileged status that is the possession of every single child of God. This is the part of the great mystery we will examine this morning. The key, of course, is always to acknowledge that everything that we have is only what we have received – which is itself a most humbling exercise. All glory, here and elsewhere, belongs always and only to our God. If we can keep this one fact in the forefront, we will not only better understand that great *mystery* mentioned in our text for this morning, it will become for us all the more spectacular and precious.

The text that will form the basis of our study this morning is found in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, the Third Chapter:

^{ESV} **Ephesians 3:1b-12 I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles--² assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you,³ how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly.⁴ When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ,⁵ which 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.⁶ This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers**

of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.⁷ ¶ Of 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.⁸ To 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,⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things,¹⁰ so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.¹¹ This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord,¹² in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.

So far the verbally inspired words of our God. Ever aware that these are, in fact, *inspired* words and therefore true and applicable in every regard, so we begin this morning with this simple, powerful prayer: **"Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth."** Amen.

Who doesn't love a good mystery? Books, movies, plays – pretty much always a staple for writers and producers because there is always a huge market. Hard to find someone who doesn't like the genre. Only that's not exactly what we are talking about here. When you and I hear the word "mystery" what usually comes to mind is an intriguing and unknown something over which we puzzle and concerning which we seek an explanation. In other words, there is an obvious question or puzzle that we try to piece together with the information available.

That's not the sort of *mystery* our text is talking about, for a couple of different reasons – chief of which was the fact that there was no real question that anyone was trying to figure out. Our idea of a mystery usually involves some sort of crime, together with the process of trying to figure out "who dunnit." The word used in our text (translated there as "**mystery**") actually refers more to a "revelation," information that was hidden and then revealed. And here's the troubling part: the specific information revealed in our text ought to thrill us, but probably doesn't. The *mystery* is the fact that the Gentiles were/are included in God's salvation plan.

One would think, since most here are Gentiles (non-Jews), that this sort of news would electrify us. Yet we tend to greet it with a sort of half-hearted, "Oh, that's nice." Why do you suppose that is? How could it be possible that we hear such great news about our eternal future without a lot of excitement or enthusiasm? Our reaction is dulled in part because that "mystery" was revealed long ago, and most of us have

heard it from the day we were born. That news is, in fact, the heart of the event we celebrate this morning: the Epiphany. The word "epiphany" means "manifestation" or "appearance" and refers to the revelation of Christ to the gentile Magi. Epiphany is God's clear message that you and I, as Gentiles, are also loved by our God and included in his salvation plan.

But there's a problem here that goes deeper than familiarity. The sad fact is it's hard for us to get too excited about the reception of something we *feel we are entitled to*. Our American sense of entitlement bristles at the thought that we could ever be *excluded* from anything on the basis of our race or origin. *"Of course the Savior came also for us!"*

Only he really didn't have to, did he? If our answer to that question is anything other than, *"No, he certainly didn't,"* then we need to reexamine the *undeserved* aspect of God's grace. The love that God showed to mankind collectively, and to each human being individually, is undeserved in every respect. To put it another way, God could have sent his Messiah to save only the Jewish race and we would have absolutely no grounds for complaint.

Clearly this sort of divine truth flies in the face of our society's sense of "fair." God is not affected by society's ever-shifting sense of justice and equality. That which is created does not get to question or dictate to the one who created it. God communicated this truth through the Prophet Isaiah when he said, ***"Woe to him who strives with him who formed him, a pot among earthen pots! Does the clay say to him who forms it, 'What are you making?' or 'Your work has no handles'?"*** [Isaiah 45:9](#)

So the first thing we need to do to appreciate this mystery of Epiphany is to get our own personal tare weight; to zero back out our internal scales. If you've ever bought something by weight or weighed yourself on a digital scale, you know what we're talking about here. You have to get the weight of the empty container before you can know for sure what was added.

Our tare weight was actually less than zero, since we were natural enemies of God. As his enemies we deserved nothing but his anger, displeasure, and punishment. Once we truly zero ourselves out in that way, the next step is to get our full or loaded "weight." While the tare weight was less than nothing, our filled weight is off the charts. We are now perfect in God's eyes – filled to the fullest with perfection. That means you and me. Gentiles. We who had no right or expectation of anything at all from our God, we are now called children of God and heirs of heaven. And unlike a human heir, where a benefactor's last will and testament can

be altered, God's will cannot. Forgiveness has been earned by Jesus Christ – a fact that can never be repealed, altered, or nullified.

This is the mystery or revelation that Paul talks about in our text: ***the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. ⁴ When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which 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. ⁶ This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.***

If this revelation ever begins to dull in your ears, know that it's time to take your own personal tare weight.

Paul then goes on in our text to talk about his own personal mystery or revelation: ***Of 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. ⁸ To 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, ⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things."***

Paul was shown his own tare weight on the road to Damascus at his conversion. What he was shown shook him to the core. Not only was he a natural enemy of God in his heart and in his thoughts, he had been living as an enemy of God in his actions. He had personally and actively persecuted the Church of God. It was therefore never with false humility that Paul said things like he did in our text: ***"To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given..."*** Paul felt his natural deficiency deeply. It truly terrified him when he learned the truth about himself. In fact his terror was made all the more profound in that he had previously considered himself to be God's righteous servant, doing the will of God by terrorizing the Christian Church. Paul (then Saul) had been so convinced of the rightness of his actions that he was willing to dedicate his life to his focused mission of eradicating the Christian Church. He staked his eternal future on the rightness of his actions. Imagine the trauma of discovering that that on which he had been staking his eternal future was in fact horribly sinful in the sight of the One who would one day judge him for all eternity. It's not hard to imagine Paul mentally carrying out his former life to its only possible conclusion, and then shuddering

with relief in the change God had brought about in him, and in the mystery revealed to him.

You and I ought to know the feeling well. Apart from Jesus Christ, you and I were – and still would be today – on that same path and doomed to hear that same pronouncement from God on the day of our judgment. It is a measure of our own "nose-blindness" that we are not daily flooded with relief and gratitude at the **"revelation of the mystery"** and the message of Epiphany.

You know "nose-blindness" – if not the term itself, you know it from experience. It is that ability we have to live comfortably in our own stench. As is actually true with all of our senses, we become accustomed to foul odors and, after a time, no longer notice them any longer. Have you, for example, ever worked hard for an entire day, taken a shower, and then smelled the clothes you were wearing? It's almost disturbing to realize you could be so blind to something so obvious. The same is actually true of all of our senses. Those who live next to an interstate, airport, or train tracks will most often tell you they no longer even hear the noise. Same thing with taste. That first bite is always more flavorful than the last.

Once Paul was washed spiritually clean by the blood of the Lamb, he was instantly shocked by his former stench. You and I, whenever we are caught up in sin, will experience the same thing when we are again washed by the Word of God. We can grow alarmingly comfortable with the foul stench of our own personal sin, and it's only God the Holy Spirit, working through his Word, that can effect that spiritual cleansing in us.

Let this then be our prayer on this Epiphany Sunday – that the Holy Spirit would strip us of all of our natural sense of entitlement and sin, reveal to us all that is foul in our lives, and then renew for each of us the joy of the forgiveness and salvation that is ours through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Isaiah 60:1-6** Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. ² For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. ³ And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. ⁴ Lift up your eyes all around, and see; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be carried on the hip. ⁵ Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and exult, because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. ⁶ A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD.

^{ESV} **Matthew 2:1-12** Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, ² saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." ³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: ⁶ "'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'" ⁷ ¶ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." ⁹ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

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The First Sunday after Epiphany – January 8, 2017

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 536 (Red Hymnal)

"Awake My Soul and with the Sun"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The First Lesson: (Isaiah 60:1-6) How clearly the Prophet here foretold the events of the first Epiphany or manifestation of Jesus Christ as the Savior of all mankind – Jews and Gentiles alike. We take for granted that we gentiles were included in God's mercy. We have no such right to assume such grace, yet we thank our God for extending his love to us all.

Psalm 8 (Supplement page 27) (Brown Hymnal)

The Second Lesson: (Matthew 2:1-12) Our Gospel lesson serves as the center-piece for our entire Epiphany celebration. Though the Promise of a Savior was repeated in the Old Testament to both Jews and Gentiles, this text reveals without question that God has invited all men to share in the salvation that Jesus came to earn. In Epiphany we celebrate how God made known his Salvation to an undeserving world.

The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed – page 5. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 130 (Verses 1-2, 5-6) (Red Hymnal)

"O Jesus, King of Glory"

The Sermon – Text: Ephesians 3:1b-12 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"The Mystery"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Installation of the 2017 Church Council

Offering followed by the Prayers

The Pre-Communion Hymn – 310 (Red Hymnal)

"Thy Table I Approach"

The Preparation for Holy Communion (Brown Hymnal page 17)

The Distribution

The Nunc Dimittis and Thanksgiving (Brown Hymnal page 20)

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 47 (Red Hymnal)

"Savior Again to Thy Dear Name We Raise"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here! **To our Visitors seeking an altar at which to commune** – Since we desire to follow the words of our Savior, we practice "Close Communion" – a practice that is not new to confessional Lutherans. This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting them to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please first meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word.

Attendance - Sunday (38) Average (45)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/ Holy Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship and Coffee time
	-11:30 a.m.	– Church Council Meeting
Wednesday	-6:00 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
	-7:00 p.m.	– Midweek Bible Study
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Sunday Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time

CLC News – Pastor Frank Gantt has accepted the call to Zion of Atlanta, GA. Pastor Mark Tiefel has returned the call to Grace of Valentine, NE.

Church Council Meeting – The Church Council is scheduled to be installed during the worship service this morning. The Council is also planning to meet during the fellowship hour this morning. Agenda items should be passed along to President Mark Johnson or to another Council member.

Parking – As the parking lot gets both skinnier and shorter, it will be increasingly important for everyone to park as close to the snow walls as possible. If we don't, it will become difficult to back out of your parking place. The Council will discuss our options should we continue to get more snow.