

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
January 6, 2013
Epiphany Sunday**

Ephesians: 3:2-12

The Mystery of the Epiphany

- 1. There is mystery on Epiphany**
- 2. Paul Speaks about that mystery in Ephesians**
- 3. Let Us Share the Discoveries**

Hymns: 549 – 83

Distribution – 80 – 366 – 314

Closing: 79 v. 1

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

² Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. 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.

⁷ I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. 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. 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. ¹² In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. Ephesians 3:2-12

When you think about Epiphany, there is a sense of mystery that surrounds this festival. For one, it is celebrated on January 6th, so it doesn't always get celebrated in our Sunday worship services. Also, because of its close proximity to December 25th, it all too often gets hidden as a small part of the bigger Christmas story. Much of that mystery, however, is created by the guests that serve to define Epiphany for us. We know them as the Magi, or the Wise Men. From Matthew's words, we know a little about them, but the mystery, of course, is created by all that we do not know about them. Though we often think of three Wise Men, because they brought three gifts to Jesus, we don't actually know how many visited Mary and Joseph. Though they often hold a spot alongside the shepherds in our picture of the Nativity, we don't actually know how old Jesus really was when they finally made it to see him. Though a familiar song calls them "Kings from the Orient," we don't actually know where in the east they came from or what they were. There is a lot of mystery in the Magi, and historians love to hypothesize about who and what they might have been.

If you were listening closely to the first lesson this morning, you heard about another mysterious guest on this Epiphany. This guest was a woman who, like the Magi, came from afar to quench her curiosity. The Queen of Sheba also creates a sense of mystery for Bible readers, because, again, we do not know all that much about her. We know that she was from the South (that is what Sheba means), we know that she was royalty, and we know that she was wealthy. We even know that she was mentioned by Jesus during one of his rebukes of the Pharisees. But beyond that, imaginations and conjectures about who she might've been tend to run wild.

As we look at the Bible readings that are chosen for the Festival of Epiphany, it might be easy to fix our focus on those visitors and we may

want to spend our time trying to figure out who they were. However, the mystery of Epiphany is not about the visitors. No! The mystery of Epiphany is about the One that those visitors came to see and learn about.

For thousands of years, the Savior of mankind was a complete mystery to almost every person in this world outside of the nation of Israel. From the promise to the prophets, God kept the plan and line of salvation inside the borders of Israel. And yet we see in the Queen of Sheba and in the Magi that there were those outside of Israel that came and sought to uncover the mysteries of God's promised Messiah. And to those few outsiders who came searching, it was discovered that the promised Messiah was not just a king for Israel, but he was the conqueror of salvation for them and the rest of the world as well. Yet for most, the promised One remained what it had always been... a mystery.

However, when the Apostle Paul spoke of this mystery of the Christ in his letter to the church in Ephesus, he spoke about it much differently. Through his words, Paul reminds us that the beauty of Epiphany for New Testament Christians is that what was once a mystery for so many, has now been revealed completely to you and me. On Epiphany, we aren't setting off on a long journey to uncover answers; instead we use this day to celebrate what God has uncovered for all the people of this world. Where is this mystery revealed? Paul says clearly that ***"the mystery has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets."*** Paul points people to the words of the Bible.

Pointing to the words of the apostles and prophets is a direct challenge for people like you and me. And that is because the natural reaction when we celebrate Epiphany, or to a larger extent, when we celebrate Christmas, and Lent, and Easter again and again is to say that we already know the story. The temptation is to tell yourself that you already know all about this mystery that was revealed on Epiphany and you don't have to spend time searching for what you already have.

However, to take on that attitude is to despise the gift that we have been given. As we look at the Queen of Sheba and the Magi, we see people who had a yearning to more fully understand the mystery of how God planned to save the people of this world. They let nothing stand in the way of their search for more answers and they travelled the world in their pursuit. Contrary to the distances that they had to go, Paul tells us that now, we have been given insight ***"which was not made known to***

men in other generations." What a gift we have living when we do! What a blessing to have the mysteries of God's salvation plan laid out before us! We have the promises, and the fulfillments; all here before us in the Word to gloriously reveal what God has done for us. Where Magi and a queen travelled thousands of miles, we can open a book to see the answers.

But do we use that gift? Do we love that gift? Do we have a craving to know more and more, to understand better and better all the details of what God has accomplished for us? Do we search like the Queen of Sheba? Would the Magi shake their heads in disgust at the apathy we often show for looking into the Words of God? Perhaps there is no better time than the New Year to think about what has been given to us, and to pray for motivation to continually appreciate and search what God has given to us, that we may always seek to better understand the answer that God has for the world.

As we turn to the Word, we will grow more and more in our insight into the mystery of Christ. We will grow in our knowledge of the beautiful plan that God has given to us. We can begin doing that by looking to Paul's words as he lays out the mystery of Christ.

The first part of the mystery found in Christ is given to us in the last verses of Paul's words, and it reveals how salvation would be accomplished. Old Testament people had to wonder. They only heard prophecies and saw shadows of how the relationship would be restored between sinful people and a holy God. However, we know that ***"in Christ Jesus our Lord and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence."*** And we know how that happened. Jesus lived a perfect life. He died a sacrificial death. He rose victoriously to prove it. Those are the basics. Yet we are given more to help us grow and become strong. The pages of the New Testament explain it in detail. As we explore that life and death in Scripture, there is no longer any mystery about how imperfect people could stand beside the holy and just God of all. It has been fully revealed.

The second part of the mystery is who it was done for. When the Queen of Sheba came to Solomon looking for answers to the most difficult questions of life, she could only hope that she might receive the answers. When the Magi started their journey by following a star, they could only hope that the King that they would find in Bethlehem might be for them. However, when we

now look to the Word and what it reveals, we don't have to hope or guess if the solution is for us. Paul says 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.”*** Though Jesus would come from the people of Israel, he would be a Savior for all the people of this world. And through Paul's words, there doesn't need to be any doubts about what is in our future. We are heirs of all the blessings that God has in store for children. We are members of a body that has Christ as its head. We hold onto the sure promise that we will share the glories of heaven with many others.

Every time, we open up and search through the words of Scripture, we are reminded of what God has given to us and we are strengthened in the faith that holds to what God says. We are given the gift to know more and more.

And then, as those who have had the mystery revealed to them, it is God's will that we would then share those discoveries with others, so that there is not a person on this earth who looks to Christ as a mystery. Paul says, ***“God's intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known.”*** As members of God's church, each one of us is to carry out to the world around us the beauty that is found in the wisdom of God and in his plan for all people.

As we each look for ways to shed light on the mystery of Christ for others, may we view that mission in the same way that Paul did. In speaking about his work as a minister of Christ, he says, ***“I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. 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, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery.”***

As we each consider our calls to be servants of the Gospel, may we first recognize that each of us shares Paul's unworthiness for what God has allowed us to do for him and his kingdom. For all our weaknesses, for all our failings, for all our excuses, there is not one of us who even deserves to know the mysteries of Christ; let alone being invited to open up those mysteries to others. Yet, we have been given that task.

So by God's grace, we also share in Paul's privilege of bringing the Gospel to others. It is grace that opens up for us the secret things of God and it is grace that allows us to have a part in

bringing the revealing light of God's Word to others.

On this Epiphany, as we think about men and women who went to great lengths to search and inquire about the mysteries of God, may we treasure what has been revealed to us so clearly in the Word of God. It is no secret for those who have the Word. Jesus was born as the Savior, he lived and died as the Savior, and now he rules as the Savior. Let us strive each day to search the Scriptures more and more to ponder the mystery of God's grace seen in Christ, and then let us share with others the Savior that we have seen there. Amen.