

“A Mystery Made Known”

When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, 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. (Ephesians 3:4-5).

The Bermuda Triangle. Roswell. Stonehenge. Easter Island. Loch Ness. The Ancient Pyramids of Giza. These iconic locations have become synonymous with mystery, and judging by the countless websites and podcasts dedicated unexplained phenomena like these, there is a collective fascination in our culture with these existential enigmas. The world is full of mysteries and there are many questions that baffle the brightest and the best of us. And the very same thing can be said about Christianity. In fact, the most fundamental teachings of the Bible are completely mysterious and cannot be logically understood or explained. For example: The Trinity, the incarnation, the virgin birth, the miracles of Jesus, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. All of these elements are foundational, non-negotiable precepts of the Christian faith...and yet, as fervently as we confess these things, not one of us can say that we totally understand them. These teachings have been revealed to us by God; in fact, we couldn't know them any other way! And these beautiful mysteries which have been made known to us by the Spirit are the very truths on which we stake our faith.

Today, we observe Epiphany. The name for this Church festival is taken directly from a Greek word (*phaneroō*) which is used throughout the Bible to indicate the act of revealing or making something known. The word “manifest” is the verb we see most often associated with this term and on Epiphany, that's exactly what the church celebrates – the revelation that Jesus came not only to deliver the people of Israel, but to save the entire world. That's what the visit of the Wise Men makes known, and in today's epistle reading Paul refers to this epiphany as, “the mystery of Christ...that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Ephesians 3:4, 6).

Paul makes a really big deal about this mystery, and that's understandable, because to the mostly Jewish audience that made up the early church, this was a shocking revelation. And yet, as we reflect on Paul's words today, this information seems fairly insignificant. After all, many of us were raised in the Christian faith and very few of us can claim Jewish ancestry, and for us Gentile Christians, we simply take this teaching for granted. Our Epiphany issue is not one of comprehension. We understand just fine what Paul refers to in Ephesians as the mystery of Christ for all people, our problem is we don't act like it.

We sing bold hymns encouraging evangelism. Today, we will pray as a congregation that, “through the Church here and around the world *the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to them.*” But when it comes to personally proclaiming our faith to others, we all-too-easily fold up. We ignore the strong language of our hymns and prayers and our lives do not reflect the Light that gives life to the world.

Paul's message in today's text, and “the mystery of Christ” about which he speaks, is the inclusive and universal message that Jesus entered our humanity, lived a perfect life under the Law, died for the sins of the entire world and was raised from the dead, conquering death and giving all humankind the promise of everlasting life. This is the gospel. This is the “mystery of Christ!” And this is the Epiphany that the Church has been called to communicate! All the things we do as a church – the social

gatherings; the weddings and the funerals; the festive holiday services; our ministry of Christian education; our outreach initiatives to the neighborhood – all of these things should serve to accomplish the job that God has given us to announce the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As Paul writes, God’s design is “that through the church the manifold wisdom of God *might now be made known*” (Ephesians 3:10).

My friends, we are the Church. And as the Church, we are called to be God’s ambassadors, and, through our proclamation, God delivers a life-saving message to the world, and yet, so often, we shrink from the task. We compartmentalize our faith, talking about it only when it’s convenient. And instead of looking to connect with new people, we resist relationships with anyone who takes us out of our normal social circles. We live near people who look like us, we hang out with those who think like we do, and we resist people who might make us a little uncomfortable. And in the process, our witness is limited and, to many for whom Christ died, He remains a mystery.

Our desire for a safe and controlled spiritual life has left us like the Pharisees who took pride in outward religious expression while completely missing the change of heart Christ came to bring. But God’s priority is always on people over pageantry. God’s attention is always on the condition of the heart rather, than the actions of the flesh. God’s focus is always on the sick and brokenhearted, rather than the proud and put together. And God’s most pressing desire is to save sinners...*just like us!*

You see, the greatest Epiphany of all comes from the revelation that Jesus came *for us!* That for us comfort-loving and self-centered people; for us, who gladly run from God and turn back to our corrupt way of life...*that for us sinners*, God’s Son came to earth...*that for us sinners*, He set aside His divine nature...*that for us sinners*, He took on human flesh...*that for us sinners*, the creator of all things submitted Himself to hunger and loneliness and sorrow and pain; that He walked in *our* shoes and carried *our* burdens and died the death that *we* deserve, and that He rose from the grave, *so sinners like us could have everlasting life!*

This is the greatest and most shocking mystery of all: That in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we have been forgiven, our lives have been redeemed, and we have been freed from the paralyzing sin that has kept us from God and from each other. In today’s text, Paul writes that in Christ and through faith in Him we may now approach God with “boldness” and “confidence.” *This is our Epiphany!* That in Christ and through faith in Him we may now live lives that point to what God has done for us; that in Christ and through faith in Him we may approach people who don’t look or think like we do; that in Christ and through faith in Him we may open the door to relationships that take us out of the places where are comfortable; that in Christ and through faith in Him we may proclaim the universal and unconditional Gospel of Jesus Christ for the salvation of all people.

Epiphany means that in Christ and through faith in Him, we can deliver God’s love and forgiveness to the people He places in our path. And as we bear witness to what the Father has given us in His Son, the Holy Spirit will be working, and we will all together see salvation made manifest before our very eyes. Go in the peace of this Epiphany promise God has made to you today. Amen.

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