

The Rev. Charlie Holt

There was an English professor at Yale. His name was William Phelps. And about this time of year he was working through his exam papers from the earlier term. And he came across one of the papers. And there was the prompt with the question and it was a very short response. It basically said something to the effect.

God only knows the answer to this question. Merry Christmas. And so, Professor Phelps wrote on the on the paper, the grade. He says, God gets an A, you get an F happy New Year. One of the big words that Paul is using throughout the letter of a of the to the Ephesians, that Paul, that, Catherine just read to us, is the word mystery.

And when we think about the word mystery, in one sense it could mean things that only God knows the answer to the question. And there's certainly a lot of mysteries about life and about reality. I was listening to a scientist talk about some of the things that human beings still have no clue about. And one of the things that he mentioned was, when you look at the different frequencies and frequencies go through light and of course the rainbow frequency of Roy G.

Biv, and then you get the ultra red and the ultraviolet, and then it gets down to radio frequencies and, and human beings have ways of measuring all these different types of frequencies. But what he was arguing is there's actually many more frequencies, which we don't even have the tools to measure in the realm of dark matter and things like that.

And, and what he, what he was, his point was, is that there's so many things about the human body, about the created order, about the cosmos, about the origins of things that we simply don't have the answer that only God knows the answer. And it's not to say that one day we won't come up with a tool to measure some of these things, or to figure some of these questions out.

But many, many things are secret to us and hidden from our sight. But when Paul is using the term mystery, he's actually using it in the other side of that term, one of my children's favorite things for me to do when I was, when they were little, we would do long road trips, and they

always wanted me to tell them Scooby Doo stories, which I loved, Scooby Doo when I was growing up.

So I always watch those shows and The Mystery Machine, and there was always these wonderful, tales of criminals that the gang would figure it out and they would, you know, nab the criminal and catch them in a trap. And then there was always this moment where the mask would be taken off. You know, that moment you take out the mask and I every time I would say, and it was Fred Jenkins and my, my kids knew that I always was going to say it was Fred Jenkins.

And they go, oh, Fred Jenkins.

It's the big reveal. And we, we have these in movies all the time. And, and that's what makes going to a movie or hearing a good story or reading a good mystery novel or the Scooby Doo series. It's what makes them fun. It's what makes them interesting is there inevitably will come a moment where something will be revealed in the story, and all of the things that had happened up to that point will suddenly go, oh, wow.

You know, I didn't think of it that way, but that makes sense of that, that, that, that, that and that and this is what Paul is, is really getting at in his letter to the Ephesians. Let me read a little bit of the of the passage back to you. He says, for this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, on behalf of you Gentiles, assuming that you have heard the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery bears that word, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation.

As I've written to you briefly 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 the prophets by the spirit. And so what Paul is saying is, this is no longer a mystery that has been kept secret, though it had been for a while, and holy prophets and apostles of old and, and Scripture writers, even the angels, Peter says, long to look into these things.

But now we've had a big reveal. I'm giving an example of one from a movie that I like is, The Empire Strikes Back. Have you ever seen that one? Yeah, I think most of us know the Star Wars series, but you'll remember the famous scene in that where Darth Vader says, I am your father. Remember that.

And what that was a big reveal because up to that point in Luke's mind, and as we're thinking about the characters, we went through an entire movie, the first one that was released and Darth Vader was all evil and all bad. We could only think that he was all dark side. And Luke was the, the, the light, and there was even a line and that and that first one did that was very instructive.

It was a clue. It pointed to some, reality that would hint at a puzzle that needed to be unraveled in a future episode. But it was when Obi-Wan Kenobi said, Darth Vader killed your father. Do you remember that? And then all of the sudden, An Empire Strikes Back. We have Darth Vader going, Luke, I am your father.

And all of the sudden, for the character Luke, and also for those who are looking on the movie watchers, the story suddenly takes on a totally different meaning, doesn't it? Is Darth Vader all bad at this point, or is there's something about him that is now redeemable, something that can be saved, and this becomes a new mission for Luke not to kill Darth Vader, but now to save him and to redeem him.

It's actually a Christ story. And this is actually the plot twist that happens with the coming of Jesus. Believe it or not, where the revelation of God that is showcased before all the world is that the Gentiles are now redeemable, that which was perceived as being all bad, all evil, all the time, all the other peoples of the world, the nations, they somehow have become precious in the sight of the Lord.

Listen to the way that Paul puts it. He says. The mystery is this that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Do you know what that word Gentiles means? By the way, I'm using the term, but basically from a Jewish perspective, if you're Jewish, Gentiles are everybody else.

It's in Hebrew, the word goy in goyim is plural for the Gentiles, and essentially it means the nations or the ethnic groups or the, the people who aren't Jewish, everybody else. I worked for a Jewish actuary in Chicago when I was in seminary. His name was Mitch, and Mitch Would. I was his basically his assistant.

I was a secretary, and Mitch would have me ordered the lunches for all the office. He would send me to the Jewish deli, and I had to give the order to the kosher Jewish deli people. And not everybody in the office was Jewish. And Jewish people have very strict rules about how you keep things kosher, like one of the rules is you don't mix dairy and meat.

And so if you put cheese on a sandwich with meat, you actually are violating the rules of being kosher. And it's disgusting to Jewish people and it's unclean. And so I would order these sandwiches and the people standing next to me would go yell, that must be for a Gentile. And so I would come back and I tell the stories of all the reactions that I was getting from the different orders that I was giving.

And we had this one guy in the office who just loved these stories. And so he always was trying to order a more and more offensive sandwich. And so I would have to go and give the order. And the pinnacle of his offensiveness was a sandwich that was called a New Yorker. Now, remember, I'm in Chicago and this is a sandwich that has coleslaw and Thousand Island dressing.

And so it's not only unclean, but it's actually a foreign sandwich, meaning not from Chicago, it's New Yorker. And so the guy behind the deli counter, as I'm ordering this sandwich, he just stops everything that he's doing. And he stares at me and he says, it's the guy that ordered this sandwich, a jerk. Says only a jerk would order a sandwich like this.

Is this guy your boss? It's like, that's not my boss, it's a coworker. And he's like, well, we don't have any thousand selling dressing. I'm going to put ketchup on this because these New Yorkers are too stupid to know the difference. But this was, my first, real experience of what does it mean to be an outsider, not included.

And, and it's silly, you know, it's it was kind of fun, actually, to go and make these orders, but I realized that from a Jewish perspective, there's being Jewish and there's being everybody else, and there's an intentional keeping of one separate that is important to them. And what Paul is saying in this big reveal is that the Gentiles, the nations let me let me read it to you again, are

The Gentiles are fellow heirs. You hear that? Fellow heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the promise. In other words, what Paul is saying is what is changed with the coming of the Messiah is that there's no longer this clean and unclean distinction between those who are in and those who are out, those who have, those who don't have the promises of God.

But God is now pulling off the curtain and opening up the gates and the windows in the doors to all the people of this world to find, inheritance power, restoration, redemption and salvation through his Messiah. That's the big reveal. It's that that the salvation of God is not just for one group of people or particular people, but it's for everybody.

And that's quite amazing when you really sit and think about that, I, I think for if you're a Gentile and sitting out here and most of you probably are, you may actually take this very much for granted. But back then, this was big news, huge news for the people of this day that that a Roman could become a child of God, that that, that a barbarian in Galatia could be, a follower of the Most High God and find forgiveness and salvation was shocking.

This news, this good news for all the people. And so Paul doesn't stop there because essentially what he's doing is he's saying all the clues that were that were written in the Old Testament, they're all starting to make sense in a way that that never had made sense before. But only after this reveal do we start to understand how carefully the story was written to all come to this moment.

And finally, we're able to see some major things happening in this world. And he goes on to say not only what the nature of the big reveal is, but the mechanism of how that salvation will come about for the people of the world. Listen. Listen again to what Paul says. And this is kind of dense, and I'll, just try to hang with it and I'll do my best to explain.

He says, to me, though, I'm very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to preach to the Gentiles. In other words, to preach to everybody, to preach to all the nations the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone. What is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages? And God, who created all things so that through the church this is the part that I really want you to focus on, so that through the church, the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Now that's, I've read this many times, so, but that may be the first time you've ever heard that passage, but it's not the way you would expect it to read that the manifold wisdom of God might now been made known to the rulers and authorities. And you would think he would say, on the earthly places. In other words, what God is doing through Jesus Christ is a threat to all of the Herod's of the world.

And Herod got the message when the wise men showed up and, and, they were saying, hey, we're following the star because we know that this is the birth of the Messiah. And here they are Gentiles. And Herod knows the scriptures well enough to know that when Gentiles are showing up, following the light of God, something big is happening and the plan of God.

And so he goes to his, scribes and the religious leaders and he goes, can you go back through some the old prophecies of the old Testament and remind me what town the Messiah was supposed to be born in? And they go back and they go, yeah, it was Bethlehem. And we didn't read this part, but Herod really went after the children of Bethlehem after that to get rid of the baby and Mary and Joseph had to flee to Egypt, which is another story.

But Herod, as an earthly ruler, was threatened by the birth of the Messiah. And we have tyrannical earthly rulers that are all over this planet. I'm most recently we've just heard of, what's his name? Maduro from Venezuela, who, has not been a very nice person to his country and an illegitimate leader and so on. And, and now has, some consequences for that.

And yet that's not who, Paul is saying has been put on notice by the revelation of the Messiah and the King of kings and the Lord of lords. I'll read it again, he says, has now been made known to the rulers and authorities. And here's the verse in the heavenly places, these are rulers and authorities in the spiritual realm.

And the cosmology of the Bible, the way that it works is that the reason why all the other nations, the Gentiles, are not following God is because they all have been enslaved and held in bondage by spiritual forces of evil. This is why they worship false gods and idols, is because these are these false gods are controlling these people, and they're holding them down and keeping them at bay.

And what they are literally worshiping are demonic spiritual forces. And so what Paul is saying is, is that with the coming of Jesus Christ and his death and his resurrection and ascension to the heavenly realms, there's a new sheriff in town in the heavenly realms and all of those powers and principalities that have been holding down and oppressing the people of this planet have now been put on notice that they are no longer in power.

And what that means for the church is very powerful. Actually, what it means is, is that the people of God, with just the word of the gospel and the announcement that Jesus Christ is Lord, can go into any town, any village, any place, and all of the entire planet and proclaim the name of Jesus. And people will bend the knee and bow their hearts to his lordship and respond in faith, because they have been delivered from the power of the evil one.

It's really quite amazing. Up to the point of Paul saying this. If a missionary had gone around the Mediterranean like Paul and tried to lead people to God, nobody would have come to faith. But now, since the unseating of the spiritual powers and authorities in the heavenly realms, anyone can take the gospel into any darkness, proclaim the name of Jesus, be a light and a witness, and people will come to faith.

It is absolutely amazing, and it's actually one of the reasons why I feel like I can preach to you.

Because I know that that God is liberating you from powerful forces in your life by merely the preaching of His Word, not by me, my power or my words. Not. Deep Thoughts by Charlie Holt, but by his spirit and the unseating of evil forces in your life. And that's quite amazing and very practical, actually, if you will take this into this 2026 year, give you, New Year's resolution and something very practical to work on in light of the big reveal.

Think about in your life places where darkness still reigns. And that could be in your own personal life. You know, like, maybe you have, like Darth Vader, a dark side. It could be. It could be your own personal dark side that needs to be set free. It could be a dynamic in your family or, something happening at your job.

Or it could be a person, or it could be an entire family. It could be an entire community. It could be the city of or of Jacksonville or Venezuela, or the United States of America or Israel, or pick a country. The power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is greater and stronger than any power of darkness that is in any of these places, any of these places.

And so if you will think about the places in your life where the personal, bondages are the places where the Lordship of Jesus Christ doesn't have reign, where this where Satan still has a foothold and pray into those places, bring the announcement of the Lordship of Jesus Christ to them. Jesus is Lord. Speak truth into the face of the lies and watch the strongholds of the evil one come tumbling down.

The Lord is wanting to liberate the people of this world. That is the mission of the gospel and the big reveal of today. But it's more personal that the Lord is wanting to liberate you and the people of your life from the evil ones control and power. Paul will go on to say in his letter to the Ephesians, it's a fantastic letter, by the way.

The whole thing's really good. But, he'll go on to say our battle is not against flesh and blood. And as bad as people like dictators in Venezuela are, and they're bad and I'm, you know, you can debate whether that was the right move or not move politically and all of that. I kind of feel like it's good that he's not controlling those people anymore, but I hope that what comes in his place is better.

We need to pray for the people of Venezuela. But the, the power that is controlling the people of this world is spiritual. And with spiritual weapons. And this is why Paul says our battle is not against flesh and blood. It's against spiritual forces, the evil one. And that's why we put on the full armor of God.

We take up the shield of faith and the breastplate of righteousness and the and the belt of truth, and we grab hold of the sword of the spirit, which is the Word of God. And we do spiritual battle for the gospel in our day. I want to invite you to stand and let us offer to the Lord our prayers and our heart as we start a new year.

I mentioned that there might be some things in your life where you would love to see the light of God shine, so I want to give you the opportunity to just lift those things up to the Lord. You don't have to say it out loud, but you can if you want. If you want to just say a word or something that, we'll give that to God.

But, Heavenly Father, we ask that you would shine your light into the dark places of this world. We're so grateful for the revelation of your gospel in the darkness as a revelation for victory and freedom and life for all people. And so we ask that you would shine your light into the dark places in our lives, in our own hearts and our own families and our own workplaces and community.

Please just take a moment and lift up those to the Lord.