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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
January 8, 2017
Epiphany Sunday

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Hymns: 128; 106; 129; 127:1,4,5 (105:1,2,8)

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: Ephesians 3:2-12

If indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, ³how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, ⁴by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), ⁵which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: ⁶that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel, ⁷of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power.

⁸To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹and to make all see what *is* the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; ¹⁰to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly *places*, ¹¹according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹²in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him.” (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth.
Amen.

In Christ Jesus, the Babe of Bethlehem, the Savior of the world,
fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: Epiphany

The Epiphany season begins on January 6th, with the 12th day of Christmas, Epiphany. Sometimes Epiphany day is referred to as Christmas for the Gentiles. Every year as we observe Epiphany we read the gospel lesson for the day from Matthew 2, which records the visit of the Magi, or the Wise Men who came from the east searching for the Newborn King so that they might worship Him. It is a significant Scripture Lesson for us because it not only begins the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy which we read this morning, but also tells us of the first of the Gentiles to come to worship Jesus as Lord and Savior.

This was the beginning of the work that the Lord would later assign to the Apostle Paul, work which Paul wrote of in our text for this morning. And so on the basis of that those words of Paul to the Ephesians, a primarily gentile congregation we consider --

THEME: Epiphany – The Big Reveal.

We begin with Paul telling us about --

I. A Mystery Being Revealed!

A mystery is something that people can't figure out. Maybe there are some clues to follow and one who carefully follows the clues will find the answer, but for most people it remains a hidden truth.

There are many such mysteries in the spiritual realm. These are truths which God has not fully revealed for all mankind. We may have questions about what heaven is like for our loved ones who await the resurrection. For the most part that remains a mystery. We know only that it is glorious and good, very good indeed. We may have questions about how it is possible for Jesus to remain true Man and still be everywhere, present with each us wherever we may be. It is a glorious and comforting truth, but it remains a

mystery. We may have questions regarding the real presence of Jesus in the Sacrament of the Altar. Again this is a wondrous truth reassuring us of our connection to Jesus and the forgiveness of sins, but it remains a mystery.

With Epiphany we see a mystery revealed, that wondrous truth that the gospel of God's grace and love was not reserved for one people, the physical descendants of Jacob, the Children of Israel, but for the people of the all nations. There were most certainly clues to this wondrous truth scattered throughout the Old Testament. There were prophecies like the one we read for our Old Testament lesson this morning. There were even Gentiles included among Jesus' ancestors, such as Rahab a Canaanite of Jericho, and Ruth of Moab. These clues along with others directed people of the nations, like the Wise Men of Matthew chapter two, to search for the Savior that was to be born that they too might worship Him.

However, the Jews didn't see this truth because of God's important command for them to stay separate from the heathen nations that surrounded them. This command was in place until "**the fullness of the time had come and God sent forth His Son**" (Galatians 4:4). This of course speaks of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. It couldn't be a more wondrous reveal of the mystery then, that the Wise Men came, these gentile believers who put their lives on hold so that they could come to worship Jesus. And so Paul wrote in our text:

Ephesians 3:2-6 "If indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, ³how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, ⁴by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), ⁵which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: ⁶that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel,"

Paul had been given the direct assignment from the Lord Jesus Himself that Paul should dispense this wondrous truth among the Gentiles. The mystery is revealed! Jesus is the Savior of the **world**; Savior to the people of **all** nations!

This has been God's intent from before the foundation of the earth. The Lord had already indicated this through the Prophet Isaiah; **“It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant To raise up the tribes of Jacob, And to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, That You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.”**(Isaiah 49:6).

So Paul declares the Epiphany truth –that glorious revelation of God's saving truth that Isaiah had already recorded, salvation goes to the ends of the earth. Epiphany is the Great Reveal! With Epiphany --

II. The Riches of God's Grace Revealed

So Paul wrote in our text:

Ephesians 3:7-9 “I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power. ⁸To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹and to make all see what *is* the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ;”

Paul speaks of this as a grace, an underserved gift, a special blessing that God called Paul to be that minister of the gospel to the Gentiles. A special gift indeed! It included a great deal of hardship for Paul in his life. Several times he was jailed or imprisoned. This epistle to the Ephesians was written while Paul was in chains in Rome. He was beaten and stoned time and again in different cities, and even left for dead. He was shipwrecked and almost perished at sea. How is it possible that Paul sees this as a great gift? Because it is the truth of Paul's salvation, a salvation that came to one who had persecuted the Church, who saw himself as the least of the apostles because of this. However by the working of the Holy Spirit Paul was brought to faith in Jesus as his Savior who forgave him all his sins. Even Paul's sin of the imprisoning and consenting to the killing, **the murder** of people who believed in Jesus, even this was forgiven! Paul was brought to comprehend this wondrous gospel that brought **him** redemption, justification, and the hope of

everlasting life, all by the effective working of the God's power in Paul's heart.

Now Paul, who after conversion saw himself as "chief of sinners," was the one the Lord assigned the administration of the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul comprehended very personally the riches of God's grace in Christ. It was his task, his purpose in life, his joy in life to "**preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.**"

From the inspired words of Paul as well as the writing of the other evangelists and apostles and the rest of Holy Scripture, this rich gospel grace has been dispensed to us. We celebrate the birth of the Lord Jesus at Christmas, recalling how the eternal Son of God condescended to become one of us, to be part of His own creation, that "**we through is poverty might become rich**" (2 Corinthians 8:9). We have learned of the unsearchable riches of Christ as we look at His holy life, and the wonder of His compassion, and the righteousness which He secured for us in His perfect fulfillment of the law. The unsearchable riches of Christ teach us that God in His grace credits us with that righteousness while "**the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all**" (Isaiah 53:6) As Paul also wrote, "**For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.**" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

All this and more, for He died for us and then rose again that the sting of death might be defeated forevermore. He did this for us, people who walked in darkness; people who *still* sin each and every day. And He forgives us our iniquities each and every day for Jesus' sake! All this and still more! Truly these are the "**unsearchable** riches of Christ!" All this is part of the great Reveal of Epiphany!

Now Paul addresses yet another aspect of the Great Reveal, and that is our part in the dispensing of this grace, that is --

III. The Church's Role in Making the Reveal.

It's a job, but aren't some jobs just that special, I mean what could be greater than being chosen as the one to hand out gifts to others.

In our house its part of Christmas. We don't all just dive under the Christmas tree and start ripping. One might grab the wrong gift. Another might cry out, "NO, that's not for you!" and so we have one designated to hand out the gifts, and then each in turn reveals the little mystery hidden by the wrapping paper. That was Paul's job, to hand out God's gift to others, especially the Gentiles. Then Paul taught the Ephesians, and so also us, that this is now **our** job. Hear again the concluding verses of our text.

Ephesians 3:10-12 "to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly *places*, ¹¹ according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹² in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him."

The wisdom of God for salvation is to be made known by the Church to all, even to the principalities and powers in high places, even the angels of heaven will see God's salvation in the growth of His kingdom, in the praises of the Church, the assembly of all who believe. This is what Church is to be about, the continuing administration of the riches of God's grace in Christ Jesus. The Church is not about the politics of this world. It is not about making this world a heaven on earth. It is not about social programs or social justice. It is about the love of God in Christ Jesus, and the great Reveal of all that God has done for us, and how Jesus has secured for us salvation.

When we think about the mission of the Church we need to start by looking right here, at St. Pauls' Lutheran Church, and how well we are doing at not only sticking to the truth of God's Word, but *dispensing* that truth.

I've got this aging M&M dispenser at home. It is starting to show its age. In this grungy old dispenser the M&M's are not as tempting as they could be, so it isn't filled with M&MS very often any more, which means it isn't dispensing M&Ms so much anymore.

Maybe that's a good thing with M&MS for me, but that shouldn't describe us as dispensers of the manifold grace of God in Christ. This is our mission! We need to stay bright and clear and easily

recognized as appealing dispensers of God's wisdom of salvation for this world. We need to be very attentive to our function that we are ready and willing, not just willing but **eager** and able to serve as dispensers of the unsearchable riches of Christ. We need to start in our own community to comfort sinners. We need to realize that our CLC Mission program needs our attention, our prayers, and, when possible, our personal participation. It's been years since anyone from St. Paul's has gone on a mission trip even to cities in the US much less to one of our foreign mission fields.

Even if we can't go personally, then realize that the Epiphany Great Reveal still includes you, and so support this work with your prayers and your offerings.

Without the great Epiphany Reveal which God intended from the beginning of the world, which the Lord set in motion even as He guided the Wise Men with the star and commissioned Paul in his preaching, we would still live in the darkness of sin and death. But now we are "light in the Lord!" Let us "walk as children of Light" (Ephesians 5:8). Let us as members of God's Church on earth find our role and fill that role as dispensers of the manifold grace of God in Christ Jesus, the Savior of the **world!**

AMEN.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.