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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
January 9, 2022
Epiphany Sunday

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12
Hymns: 129; 127; 130:1-2,5-6; 131:5

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, God our Savior, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: What we take for granted.

There are so many blessings we take for granted in life. When I say take for granted, I mean blessings we just don't even think about that are part of life to such a degree that we couldn't imagine life without them, and yet we do very little to keep them safe and secure in our lives. We assume that these blessings are supposed to be there and will always be there.

It can be something as essential as a roof over our heads. Just a few weeks ago we had terrible storms in the central states remove this blessing from many Americans' lives. When the threat of storms came to our area maybe it made us appreciate this blessing a little more. We could say the same about many other blessings in our lives: family, our jobs, daily bread, all blessings that are easily underappreciated until they are taken away.

On this Epiphany Sunday our thoughts are turned by the Holy Spirit to an even greater blessing to which we give little thought, and which can slip away from one all too easily, that is our place in God's family. This was a matter of great concern which the Apostle Paul had for Gentile Christians in his day, and it remains a matter of concern today, and on to the end of time. Paul once spoke of Gentiles coming into the family of God as a branch from a wild olive tree that was grafted into a good, cultured tree. He made the point that other branches had been pruned out of the good tree, referring to those Jews who were unbelieving, and Gentiles that had been called to faith had been grafted into their place. He also made the point that if those Jewish branches had been pruned out, we Gentiles should never be complacent about our faith, for we also could be pruned out because of unbelief and unfruitfulness. (Romans 11:19-22)

On this Epiphany Sunday the Holy Spirit would lead us to appreciate more fully this gift of God's grace. In our text the Holy Spirit is --

**THEME: Revealing the Mystery of Christ
Regarding All the World.**

Let us begin by considering --

I. The Mystery Regarding the Unsearchable Riches of Christ.

Epiphany closes the Christmas season of the Church Year. During the Christmas season we marvel anew each and every year at the mystery of the Son of God becoming incarnate. How could it ever be possible that the One through whom all things were made would be willing to become part of that which He had created? How could it be possible that the Divine would condescend to take on flesh and blood and the mortality of sinful man, when He Himself was without sin? These also are wonders of grace that we might easily take for granted, and that wonder which we celebrate each and every Christmas is indeed a mystery we cannot ever fully appreciate, even though it is so gloriously revealed for us in Scripture.

The wonder of Epiphany is found in the true extent of God's forgiving grace. There is a reason why we read the account of the wise men coming from the east to search for Jesus as the newborn King of the Jews so that they might worship Him. Our focus is that they were the first of the gentile nations to come and worship Jesus. We don't know how they came to their knowledge of the Scriptures. Some speculate that it was from the writings of the Daniel, or it could have been from the records of Ezra or Nehemiah who also served in the court of the Persian kings. What matters, both for them and now for us, was that they were presented with the prophecies of the coming Savior, and the Holy Spirit worked faith in their hearts to believe. They were then led with a special sign from God as they followed the star and made that arduous journey all the way to Bethlehem in Judea to worship the One they knew to be their Redeemer King.

Our text makes it clear that Gentiles coming to faith in Jesus was part of God's eternal purpose. There are many Old Testament prophecies that proclaim that the Messiah was to come for all nations. Part of what makes the riches of the grace of God in Christ "unsearchable" is the magnitude of the sacrifice that would be

offered to God on our behalf by Jesus, the Christ. We cannot begin to fathom the wonder of the glory that is Christ Jesus. We read of this in Isaiah:

⁵“*And now the LORD says,
Who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant,
To bring Jacob back to Him,
So that Israel is gathered to Him
(For I shall be glorious in the eyes of the LORD,
And My God shall be My strength),*

⁶*Indeed He says,
'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 42:5-6)

That is the first great truth we celebrate in Epiphany: **Jesus is God's salvation to the ends of the earth!** All people of all nations, for all time fall under the umbrella of Christ's redemptive sacrifice.

But as the saying goes, “But wait! There's more!” Consider --

II. The Dispensing of God's Grace.

God called the Apostle Paul first to faith and then to his apostolic office that he might be God's messenger to the Gentile nations, Of course Paul's message began with the wonder of grace we just talked about. But we have that added, “**There's more!**” What was more and what was different, that had not been previously revealed, that had been held hidden, “*in mystery*” was the status of those who were being saved from among the gentiles.

This was an important truth that had immediate implications for the early New Testament Church. Throughout the Old Testament times the gentiles were kept separate from the people of Israel. This was according to God's command to isolate them from the idol worship of the world and to preserve the chosen people of God for the coming of the Savior. Gentile converts were not allowed to enter the actual temple. Faithful Jews were not allowed

to enter the homes of Gentiles. This idea of separation was deeply ingrained in the consciousness of the Jews. All believers would be saved, but during this life on earth all were not to be together. It was assumed that all were not equal before God.

Paul's assignment from the Lord was to declare that this separation was now eliminated by Christ's coming. *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."*

(Galatians 3:28)

This is a special dispensation of God's grace. We, the people of the Gentile nations may take this blessing for granted, perhaps assuming that of course we should be accepted before God, after all we were *What? What were we that we should be accepted into the household of God? What we were was the people sitting in darkness. What we were was idol worshipers and sinners. There is no foundation found among us for God to give us any consideration other than considering us for perdition, "For we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."* (Romans 3:23)

This is the special mystery of God's grace and God eternal purpose that Paul is highlighting in our text: we too are children of God, heirs with Christ, members of the household of God! We who once were not a people are now the people of God, (1 Peter 2:9) right along with Abraham and all the Children of Israel who believed.

This is the truth that is evident in the makeup of the visible Christian Church. What we see in the visible church in the world, are those who profess to be believers in Christ Jesus, and what we see is that they come from every nation under heaven. The Gospel has gone out into all the world, and people of every nation, people still living in every nation under heaven have heard the gospel, and those whom the Holy Spirit has called to faith are one body in Christ.

What was Paul's special stewardship of God's grace is now --

III. The Ministry of the Church.

We read in our text: "to make all see what *is* the fellowship of the mystery, ... ¹⁰ 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.”

(v.9-12)

We look at the Church and we see this truth is evident in the Church's makeup, but it is greater than this. Christ our Lord commissioned us, His Church to go out into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. As we preach, we make it clear that we are one in Christ. There is no barrier between us. The wall of division has been torn down in Christ.

If the wall of division that God had established for Old Testament purposes has been removed by Christ's coming, then most surely any manmade distinctions or divisions should not come into play at all. The believers in Africa, in India, in Israel , Nepal, in Pakistan, in Iran, and in Saudi Arabia, and in China (Yes, there are many children of God even in these countries where believers are persecuted or the Gospel has been declared illegal.) all these are our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are one in Christ.

While we are not able to fellowship with all who profess to be Christian, **we are blessed** to express this unity with those who confess the truth of God's Word. It is a blessing that we should treasure. Many of these believers serve as excellent examples for us regarding professing the faith under duress and persecution. They remind us how precious the gospel is for all who believe. As we remember the grace that is ours in Christ, we shall be moved to serve the Lord, and do all we can to advance this message of salvation that elevates us from the status of lost and condemned, to being the children of God.

People in America, and in every nation under heaven need to know the wonders of this mystery; through faith we are all one in Christ! We all share a wonderful blessing through faith in Christ Jesus, access with boldness to the very throne of God. Where our text ends is where our spiritual activity celebrating this grace begins. We turn to the Lord confident that He wants us to pray, and that He is eager to hear our prayers. It is a basic tenet in the worship of God. We open our hearts to the Lord, we talk to Him, knowing that

He hears all we have to say, and will act on our prayers according to His gracious good will for us, and the advancement of His kingdom on earth.

We pray for forgiveness; we know He grants it for Jesus' sake. We pray for a stronger faith; and we know He sends His Spirit into our hearts through the gospel. We pray for His favor; and we know that we live under His grace and love. We pray for His blessing upon our ministry of the gospel; we know He empowers the message we proclaim His name. We pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ here in our congregation, throughout America, and across the globe; we know He cares for them all and watches over them for Jesus' sake.

That is what this blessing means for us. As we pray for them, they pray for us, and we exercise this marvelous fellowship of faith in Christ, looking for and hastening unto the Day when we shall all together stand before the Lord, basking in His glory. And that we will never take for granted. Until that day we rejoice together as one family celebrating "*the unsearchable riches of Christ.*" (v.8)

AMEN.

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