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Peace, Sun Prairie
January 6, 2019
The Epiphany of Our Lord

Ephesians 3:2-12

A MYSTERY REVEALED:
THE GOSPEL IS ALSO FOR GENTILES

The powerful angels of heaven listen with breathless fascination at today's reading from Ephesians chapter 3. For this was not something they ever found out about in heaven. It is only revealed through God's Church on earth. By contrast, today's revelation is normally so totally *not* on our radar as we who are in the Church go about our day to day earthly business that at first it may strike us as almost irrelevant –a non-thing. But it is most relevant because it involves us directly. More importantly, God opens up and reveals His thoughts, His designs, and His masterplan for bringing salvation to people. That's worth our attention no matter what.

In this letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul calls it a mystery. What's the mystery? Simply this: The Gospel is also for Gentiles. That statement is so simple: The

Gospel is also for Gentiles. Perhaps we take it so for granted that our first reaction is: “Yeah, what’s so mysterious about that? Nothing new here. Let’s move on!”

But let’s challenge that reaction. Think about this: do non-churched people know they’re welcome here? Would it even occur to them that they’re welcome here? Might it feel more like sitting out in the parking lot of a wedding dance to which they have no invitation to prove they have a right to be there? They aren’t dressed for it anyway. Now a more important question: are they welcome here? Are they? By you personally? You see, this directly pertains to the mystery the Apostle Paul unravels for us in Ephesians 3.

In this section of the letter to the Ephesian believers, Paul spells out three ways that this mystery is now realized. First, the very fact that Paul was assigned by Christ the task of bringing the Gospel to Gentiles. Listen again to Ephesians 3: *Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly.* [In other words, Jesus revealed to Paul directly that his assignment would be to carry the Gospel to the Gentile

world.] *In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to Gods' holy apostles and prophets... 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.*

Already in the Garden of Eden God promised a Savior for all of humankind. He repeated that promise to Abraham some 2000 years before Christ. Then God chose the Jewish people to be the nation from which the Savior would arise. God said time and again that Israel would be a witness for the salvation of the entire world, that people from all over the world would be drawn to the Savior who would come from Israel. God even sent prophets to the Gentiles directly, like Jonah to the Ninevites. But for the most part the people of Israel thought of God's salvation plan as their own thing and didn't pay much regard to the idea of bringing it to the world.

Now picture this: Imagine a church system with cathedrals, a caste of educated priests, heavy

administrative organization, all kinds of ornate décor, priestly uniforms and apparel, a daily regimen of services all meticulously carried out at specific times according to a prescribed ritual and order, a thoroughly regulated church life –the pipe organ, choir, pews, the stained glass windows, Christmas and Transfiguration, schools, weddings and funerals –might a person behold this complex yet self-contained system, this community of religious activity, and think, “To be apart from all this is to be apart from God and salvation. Right here in this church system is where it’s all at.”

For so many centuries Israel had its own complex religious system centering on the temple in Jerusalem, a religious system that affected every aspect of their daily lives including the clothing they wore and the food they ate. It was hard for them to imagine there could be a salvation outside of and apart from all that. So the idea of including Gentiles in this salvation plan was a mystery to the Jewish people –something not on their radar.

Though all that structure, ritual and décor had its useful and godly purpose, the salvation God has provided for all people comes ever so simply. It becomes ours in a way no one could have guessed -simply through faith in

Christ Jesus. Faith in Christ Jesus apart from all systems, traditions, costumes, rituals, or any outward thing. Faith alone in Christ alone. That means this salvation is accessible to all, to anyone anywhere from any walk of life. Do you start to see the implications of that reality for us in Sun Prairie, for all the non-churched folks we might reach in Sun Prairie? This is God's will. He wants His salvation brought to all people. He designed that salvation to be brought in the simplest way by communicating the Gospel.

The second part of this mystery realized as God unfolded His salvation plan is what Paul wrote here in Ephesians: *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.* Even though Gentile believers had none of the Jewish background, none of the richness of their ritual and public worship, they would not be second class citizens in the Kingdom of God. No one would have expected this. Indeed, many early New Testament believers were surprised and had trouble wrapping their minds around it. Non-Jewish believers –Romans or Greeks or Africans or Chinamen who previously had known nothing of the Jewish nation

—through faith in Jesus enjoyed and had a right to every aspect of salvation in God.

Is that still a mystery to you personally? Perhaps you see people so involved at church, volunteering all the time, and their familiarity with Bible doctrine or of the organization WELS is miles beyond yours. You can't imagine that they could ever be as guilty of sin on the same level that you are. You wouldn't even argue at taking a back seat to them in the Kingdom of God. But you are equally a co-sharer of all the blessings of salvation with them. Not because you are as good as they are, but because you are as redeemed as they are. Jesus died on the cross to pay for your sins no less than He did for the Apostle Paul or the Evangelist Luke or the Prophet Jeremiah. Jesus' resurrection and His victory over death belong to you through Baptism just as much as it belongs to anyone else in this room.

That brings us to the third blessing that is realized when the mystery is revealed that the Gospel belongs also to the Gentiles. Ephesians 3 says, *God's 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, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In*

Christ and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. This is not so much a reference to prayer as it is your status before God as you trust in Jesus. Through faith in Jesus you are regarded as holy by God. At all times, wherever you are –on the highest mountain or in the some coal mine a mile underground you are in the presence of God. You needn't cower or cringe or walk around under a dark cloud as though you are continuously under God's disapproving frown. God regards you just as openly, just as winsomely, just as approvingly and with just as much concern as He does for His own Son, Jesus.

A person would think you could gain that status of approval with God only after achieving some difficult task or reaching some level of spirituality –picture the wise, robed guru sitting cross-legged at the peak of the mountain and the person journeying all the way up to seek out the answers to life's most difficult questions. You don't need to undertake such a climb to reach the true God. Through faith in Jesus He's all yours, right here, right now and always.

These are things we never could have guessed on our own: mysteries –first, that God intended to bring salvation to all Gentiles; secondly, that all believers,

Jew or Gentile, share the blessings of salvation equally through faith in Jesus; and thirdly that we all have the same status of free access to God –all of it brought to us simply by the preaching and administering of the Gospel. Even angels find that fascinating.