

Ephesians 3:1-12

The Epiphany of Our Lord (Midweek) + January 9, 2019

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho

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The Mystery of Epiphany

The Word of the Lord from Ephesians 3:6: "This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

The mystery of Christmas is the Incarnation, of course: the Baby in the manger is God and man. How can that one baby have two natures, human and divine? We can't explain it. By the grace of God, we believe it.

Epiphany highlights another mystery, one that St. Paul mentions in our text for this evening. It pervades our readings for this service, highlighted by the magi arriving from the East – not Eastern Judea, but Arabia or Persia, what was once Babylon. Babylon, as in the empire that destroyed Jerusalem and the temple: now their wise men come to worship Jesus, quite likely because the Word was carried to Babylon in the exile. This is the delightful mystery of Epiphany, says Paul: the Church, the one body of Christ, is composed of both Jews and Gentiles.

In the multicultural nation of the United States, it's hardly a shocker: Jews and Gentiles both as believers, sharing Christianity? Well, ho-hum. But for the first generation of Christians in the New Testament, it's a remarkable proclamation. Ever since the Tower of Babel, nations have been separate and suspicious of each other. Ever since Abraham was chosen to be the father of Israel, the world's population has been divided into two kinds: Jews and Gentiles, Israelites and everybody else. Sure, some Gentiles have been true believers in the Old Testament – but the conversions have been few, and they've always been second-rate worshipers around the temple.

No more, says Paul: Jews and Gentiles are fellow heirs of the kingdom of God, partakers together in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel. This is a constant theme as he makes his way through his various missionary journeys in the book of Acts: each time Paul arrives at a new place, he first preaches in the synagogue for as long as he can. This makes sense: for one thing, these are Paul's fellow Jews, and he earnestly desires that his fellow Jews be saved. For another, they have dibs: they have had the privilege of safekeeping the Old Testament – they know the Word, so they should be quick to believe that Jesus is the Messiah prophesied throughout the ages. That's often not the case in Paul's travels; but whenever Paul is no longer welcome in the synagogue, he doesn't leave town. He only leaves the synagogue. He keeps preaching Christ to the Gentiles, as well as any Jews who follow to listen. Christ is the Gentiles' Savior too, as much as He is the Savior of the Jews: if He is not, then the Gospel is not the Gospel. See, if Jesus is more of a Messiah for the Jews than the Gentiles, it means that some are saved not by grace, but by ancestry. They're saved by luck of the draw, or they're saved by the work of their forefathers in keeping the family tree inside the twelve tribes.

None of that, says Paul: all are saved solely for the sake of Christ, crucified for the sins of the world. The Greek believer who lives in Ephesus is just as sure of his salvation as the Jewish believer born in the shadow of Jerusalem's temple. Both have the same boldness and access with confidence to God in Christ Jesus.

Back then, the mystery is astonishing news. For us today, it might strike as more of a yawn. Our society thrives on inclusiveness, tolerance and acceptance. The greatest sins of the

age are discrimination, intolerance and judgmentalism. In fact, our culture today would have you believe that our society is doing very well at breaking down barriers and accepting people, no matter who they are. The world is very hard at work for equality between men and women, equal rights and equal pay; in some nations, they're working on equal rights for household pets. The world is hard at work for equal treatment of same-sex unions, marriage and all; as well as the elimination of different social classes and privileges. The co-existence – and an enforced legitimacy – of all religions is another bullet point on the world's agenda.

Meanwhile, the Christian Church is often accused of being the poster boy of intolerance. Christians are reported as a nasty bunch who teach that there's a difference between men and women, that marriage is between a man and a woman, that other religions don't lead to heaven and not everybody's idea of morality is in fact God-pleasing. Thus the Church seems to be the big problem while the world works so hard to be inclusive.

Of course, to accomplish this inclusiveness, the world is always paradoxically setting one group against another. The news and op-ed pages (if there's a difference these days) seem full of stories about divisions of men versus women, majorities versus minorities, workers versus management, students versus teachers, poor versus rich, private sector versus public sector, born versus unborn, fit versus fat, liberal versus conservative, red states versus blue states, the rest of the Middle East versus Israel, etc. In its quest to be tolerant and inclusive, the world is very good at pitting just about everybody against everybody. That's because lip service to inclusiveness is often done in service to all sorts of sins of greed, lust, pride, covetousness, hatred and idolatry.

No matter the homage paid to the ideal of inclusiveness and tolerance, clearly it's very difficult for everybody to get along.

As Christians, it's easy to become defensive; and while it is important to defend the whole counsel of God, we have the privilege of proclaiming the most inclusive salvation of all. The mystery of Epiphany is no longer a mystery: it's the Good News that Christ has died for all, so that all who believe in Him will be saved. Grace is not for only men or women, Jews or Gentiles, young or old, tall or short, rich or poor. God doesn't see all of these distinctions when it comes to the kingdom of heaven: He sees those who are saved by faith, and those in need of salvation because they do not yet believe.

Will there be differences in this world? Yes, because we are given different talents, abilities, possessions, offices, responsibilities and circumstances. As Christians, we acknowledge the differences and distinctions that God makes. There will also be sinful distinctions and divisions in this world because of bigotry, greed, lust and other sins; and we must confidently and consistently denounce these sins when they are found. Too often, Christians have justified discrimination or racism in the name of Jesus, and that is simply wrong.

When it comes to standing before the throne of God, though, all those distinctions of this world disappear because we are all sinners for whom Christ has died. We make this point often, by the way: were either the President or the governor to visit us here, we would address them in conversation as "Mr. President" and "Governor," because in this world they hold offices of God-given authority. But when we pray for them before the throne of God, we pray for "Donald" and "Brad," even as we recently prayed for "Barack" and "Clement." To use first names is not to show disrespect, but to acknowledge that before God, titles and distinctions of this world disappear.

This why Paul says elsewhere in Galatians 3:27-29, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then

you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise." Clearly, there are still men and women, Jews and Greeks in the world today – but when it comes to grace, these distinctions mean nothing. Christ has died for all, and all baptized believers are one in Him.

There is great comfort for you in this mystery of Epiphany revealed: no matter who you are, Christ's grace is for you. Grace is freely given. It has nothing to do with race, heritage, family line, gender, quality of life or quantity of past sins. When Jesus says, "I forgive you," there is no caveat that this applies only to white males under 45 years of age or any such thing. Whoever you are, you can be sure that salvation is yours. That is why Paul declares that you have access with confidence to God through faith in Christ.

After all, has Christ died for you? Yes, for He has died for all.

Are you baptized? Then He has given this forgiveness to you.

Are you then forgiven? Oh, yes. You are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen