

Sermon for Epiphany Sunday, January 8, 2023
Ephesians 3:1-12

The Mystery of Christ

I love a good mystery! One of my favorite authors is John Grisham, but other famous mystery novelists include Agatha Christie, P.D. James, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (of Sherlock Holmes fame). You probably have your own favorites.

Mysteries have a way of keeping us in suspense, keeping us guessing, on the edge of our seats until the very end. So when I read the phrase “*the mystery of Christ*” in today’s lesson, I was hooked. The author further says in this passage that “*this mystery was made known to me by revelation,*” that “*in former generations [it] was not made known to humankind,*” that it is a “*mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things.*” Wow! Where can I watch that movie? Is it on Netflix? Do I have to get HBO? The Greek word for mystery is *mysterion*, and it can mean “*hidden or secret thing not obvious to the understanding, a hidden purpose or counsel, a mystical or hidden sense.*”¹ The word itself makes us want to know more, doesn’t it?

Today we are celebrating the Christian holiday known as “Epiphany.” That word itself means revelation, appearance, manifestation. (Like a mystery unveiled, we could add.) So the day of Epiphany is a celebration of God’s appearing on earth as Jesus Christ. It is considered the end of the Christmas season. (I had a favorite aunt and uncle who would always wait until Epiphany to take down their Christmas tree. Anyone still have yours up?) One of the biblical texts associated with Epiphany is the story of the so-called “three wise men” or “three kings.” I appreciated Deryll’s (sorry, Amoz’s!) telling of that story in the Time for God’s Children both last week and then again this week, and his reminder that they were foreigners from a distant land, Persia in fact, a land having its own religions and understanding of who God is. The image of star and light play an important role in that story. As it does in the day of Epiphany. As we heard in this morning’s text from Isaiah, “*Arise, shine, thy light has come.*”

Which brings us back to the word mystery. We could ask Isaiah, what or who is that light, to whom has it come, and what might it mean for us—all of us—to arise, and shine? Turns out, those are precisely the questions which this morning’s text from Ephesians answers! Are you ready? Are you on the edge of your seats? ☺

Let me cut to the chase. The writer very clearly and succinctly unveils what he means by the phrase “the mystery of Christ” in verse 6. Let’s look at that verse again. “*...that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*”

It’s almost impossible for us to fully appreciate just how surprising, startling, even shocking those words were to their original readers. To put it simply, the Gentiles were not supposed to be fellow heirs with the Jews. That was never part of the plot in this mystery novel. Quite the opposite! Or so they thought.

It may help to review briefly just that a Gentile is. According to my Bible dictionary, a Gentile is simply anyone who is not a Jew. But that definition carries a lot of hidden weight. For Jews, their identity—ethnically, culturally, and religiously—was everything. They believed that they had been specially chosen by God. This went way back in their history, their “mystery

¹ Thayer’s Greek Lexicon, “μυστήριον.”

novel,” way back to Genesis, in fact, back to the time when God had foretold the descendants of Abraham through his grandson Jacob. Otherwise known as Israel. God then formed those descendants as a “people.” Guided them. Accompanied them. Rescued them. Offered to be their personal God. Taught them. Made multiple covenants with them. Hung in there with them. And in return God simply expected them to be “holy.” Set apart. Different. Different from whom? we might ask. Well, different from everyone else. And Gentiles, by definition, were those “everyone else.” This was as engrained in the Jewish sense of identity as the labels “Christian” and “non-Christian” are to us. Or perhaps “American” and “non-American,” which for us would be our “everyone else.”

Gentiles, simply put, were foreigners. Outsiders. And the Torah forbade Jews from mingling with Gentiles in a wide number of ways. Like, eating with them. Certainly marrying them. Even worshipping with them. Unless, that is, a given Gentile was willing to convert to the Jewish faith. But conversion needed to be whole hog. Pun intended, because this included dietary laws, circumcision, everything. Those desiring to worship the God of Israel but unwilling to convert were referred to as “God-fearers.” But they were still Gentiles, still outsiders. They were allowed in the outer court of the temple in Jesus’ day, but that was it.

But then came the Apostle Paul. As strict and militant of a Jew as he had been, he received an unexpected and shocking revelation that Gentiles were to be welcomed just as they are. No conversion required. They were no longer to be considered outsiders. They were all “inside”—Jew and Gentile alike. The Gospel was for everyone. Christ was for everyone.

Not that there hadn’t been earlier hints about this very radical inclusivity and universalism. The original Hebrew and Greek terms meaning Gentile, *goy* in Hebrew and *ethnos* in Greek, could also be translated simply as “nation.” And from Genesis on God had always made clear that his plan was to be God of all the nations. Every last one. It just was going to take a little while.

This, we could say, is the mystery—hidden in part for a time, but now fully revealed. This is the Gospel, the good news. This is God’s grace in action. As the writer says in verses 7-9, *“Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace that was given me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things.* Notice these key words and phrases: gospel; servant; gift of God’s grace; power; boundless riches of Christ; plan of the mystery; hidden for ages; in God, who created all things.

We here in Hillsboro, KS live almost 2,000 years after these words were written. The world today is a different place from what it was then. Very different, obviously. Two thousand years different. In some ways, that is. Not so different in others.

Our job as Christians and as God’s children—and especially as the church—is to keep welcoming the Gentiles in, as shocking as that may seem at times. Which requires us to figure out who they are, in our time and place. Who are the outsiders? Who is being excluded from God’s radical inclusivity? In what ways are we ourselves blinded by our own radical exclusivity, an exclusivity not of God’s intention, but of our own hubris, our own, dare I say, sin? Our own misunderstanding of sin, and tendency to label the “other” as “sinner?” What are the *“boundless riches of Christ”* that we keep trying to put bounds back on? What is *“the wisdom of God in its rich variety”* that we are presently unable to fully see, but nevertheless have been called to *“make known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places?”*

It is not for me to answer those questions for you. You must answer them for yourselves. But answer them you must.

I will at least say this. If you are not yet sitting on the edge of your seats, you should be.

Amen.

Our closing hymn is a wonderful new Epiphany text, sung to the beloved, grand tune “All Creatures of Our God and King.” Let’s sing it with gusto, and as we do so, listen for all the hints of mystery it contains.