

Ephesians 3:1-12
The Epiphany of our Lord
January 6, 2024

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

Our text, from our *epistle* reading, Paul speaks of the gospel going out to the gentiles this way: "... This grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things..."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

As a congregation, we've now observed this festival of Epiphany an adequate number of years in order to meditate richly on the various components of the visit of the Magi, the occasion of history we mark as 'the epiphany of our Lord' – Christ being made known to the nations.

But, what good is history's first occasion of Christ's revelation to the gentiles (we and 99% of those that make up all of church history) if that first occasion is not followed by history's second, third, fourth, and thousandth occasion of God's mercy in Christ Jesus being shared with the gentiles. Where Matthew includes the account of the Magi to teach his Jewish readership that the gospel is for the nations as well, the other evangelists and St. Paul also regularly record occurrences of the Gospel being shared with those outside of Jerusalem and Judea – also with

those in Samaria and beyond the Jordan and in Asia Minor and southern Europe and unto the ends of the earth.

In fact, so replete is the New Testament with such record that we tend to take it for granted... we tend to forget that we gentiles were outsiders to the promises made to Abraham and his offspring. Our lineages were those best described by ‘sitting in the darkness of death,’ completely ignorant of the plans of God to bring His Christ into the world for our salvation, such ignorance thus defining our societies by ‘darkness.’

Consider how ‘natural’ it feels in this generation to live in the brokenness of a society reverting back to gentile darkness – how such wandering and aimless waywardness infects our own homes, our own lives, our own minds. Our society is clearly in the dark, not only regarding its salvation, but even its creation and it expends so much energy trying to figure out what terms like “marriage” and “family” and “gender” mean... all terms clearly knowable in the order of God’s creation and the light that redeems us back to that divinely-given definition of our world. But, as our reverting society drifts back into gentile darkness, how much that threatens us. Our families are not immune to attacks on marriage; our households are not insulated from daily-life contact with society’s gender confusion; our own minds are not ironclad to keep out the despair and depression such isolated

darkness and confusion causes. And soon, we find ourselves wrestling with whether the promises of the New Adam and adoption into sonship in the household of God is worth anything because we are groping around in society's darkness under the misconception that *it* is the light of day.

When, in the clarity of Truth, we are able to see the murky darkness in which our generation lives, we again love the perfect plans of God to bring His Christ into the world for our salvation. And, when we think on *that* rightly, we rejoice anew in the account of the Magi. But we also ought rejoice anew in Christ's revelation to the gentiles *beyond* the Magi... for, it can be said that the Magi had to seek out the Christ (albeit led by God's star), but we gentiles need to recognize: the beauty of the Gospel, the abundant generosity of the Gospel, is that the Christ seeks out us! He does not passively remain forever in the manger, to be adored as a lifeless idol; nor passively remain forever on the cross, nor even remain forever in the garden outside the empty tomb, but rather says to Mary, "Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father." In other words, Jesus completed the Messianic mission precisely so that He could return to the throne and be the head for His Church, and lead her out into the nations to come find us gentiles.

Indeed, what a joy is ours in reading, for example, St. Paul's epistle to new Christians in Ephesus – formerly in gentile darkness – what a joy to read that text and consider Christ at work in seeking out those in gentile darkness and bringing them (and, if them, also *us*) into His marvelous light.

Listen to how Paul speaks of it to the Ephesians: “For this reason”... What does that phrase refer to? Paul's previous comments describe Jew and Gentile being grafted together in one body (Christ having made peace by the blood of his cross), both Jew and Gentile are now one body, fellow citizens with one another and all the saints and members of the household of God – that's our new identity in the light of Christ and no longer in the darkness of the world – one body that is the Church, “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.”

That's what it means that you were called out of darkness into Christ' marvelous light, to be grafted into this life of the Church. That's the Messianic mission begun in the virgin's womb, completed upon the cross, now narrowed down to the salvation of each individual sinner.

“For this reason,” Paul says (“For salvation to be delivered to each of you” Paul says), “I [was made] a prisoner for Christ

Jesus on behalf of you gentiles.” Notice that; the gospel was not to remain among the Jews (Paul being one of them); it was to come to *you*. And so, Paul was made a prisoner of Christ for your sake. And, Paul goes on for four verses reminding the Ephesians of the special revelation by which he had been called, which he reminds them of to point out that they can trust his effort/purpose in sharing with them the gospel.

Now, if we dwell on this too long, we become envious that we don't have some fantastic story like Paul about the apostolic revelation being given to us (or, at least to our pastor). But, understand it rightly: how was Paul first called, but that Ananias was sent to find Saul and baptize him into the adoption of sons. Is that any different than you? In fact, is it any different than any pastor who has ever been charged with the care of Christ's sheep?

So, when Paul says, “When you read [of how the mystery was made known to me by revelation], you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ,” need we say, “Well then, I guess we can't relate, because we only have baptism”? No! To be sure, Paul appeals to his apostleship, that the Ephesians need not question his authority in conveying to them the gospel. But every pastor that comes to every congregation does so having been baptized into the same apostolic faith and having been

established into the Office to wield the Word of Truth in which is the so-called ‘mystery of Jesus Christ.’

And what does Paul say is the mystery of Jesus Christ, whether spoken of by an apostle or by a pastor 2000 years later? “This mystery” our text says “is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” *That’s* the mystery... not how Paul became an apostle, but how *you* became a Christian; how *you* were called out of darkness and given a share in the full inheritance promised the sonship of God. What a wondrous mystery, revealed in the Word made flesh proactively seeking out the nations and claiming you as His own.

Thus, Paul points out, any pastor’s ministry is not for his own glory, but for the gentiles’ share in Christ’s glory. Paul says, “Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God’s grace... To me, though I am the very least of the saints, this grace was given, *to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things.*”

Do you hear what the gift of God’s grace truly is? The preaching of the unsearchable riches of Christ, and – in that preaching – the bringing to light (for all who will hear) what is the plan of the mystery long-hidden by the Creator, now revealed in

his Son. In other words, in the preaching you gentiles hear each week, you have the same exact revelation as was given the Magi when they gazed upon the Christ child. They had searched the stars, the heavens, for signs from the God who created all things, and yet they were pointed to the Christ child, and they looked upon him and said, Here is the One who brings light to everyone; here is the One who *is* the plan of the Creator's gospel. That plan that was long mysterious to us is now revealed in this Child.'

How gracious has the Creator been to us, that we know His mysterious plan so well revealed in the Christ that its recounting almost bores us! So securely do we live in the mystery having been revealed to us that we are tempted to think it not glorious in the least, but to give it up and go search in the darkness for a 'new' light! Repent and resist such temptation! For, whether you hear it from the apostle or from a mere pastor, what does the Word of the Lord say regarding how that once-mysterious plan is revealed to all? – “so that *through the church*” – (why look elsewhere when the Word says the mystery is revealed *through the church*) – “through the church, the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.”

Who are those 'rulers and authorities in the heavenly places'? Doesn't the apostle say we wrestle against the 'powers

and principalities of darkness'? And, there's that word: "darkness." The gentiles do not simply sit in 'darkness' in terms of 'their own ignorance.' The nations sit in spiritual darkness; and you, former gentile, have not only been rescued from that darkness by Christ's marvelous light, but you have also been equipped with that light of Christ to live among and resist and withstand – and even pierce – the spiritual darkness that blankets the children of Adam in the life of the Fall.

Hear it again: "... so that *through the church* the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the ruler and authorities in the heavenly places." Yes, in the mystery of the Gospel (that same word 'mystery' also being used elsewhere to speak of the Sacraments) in the mystery of the Gospel, Christ has brought you into the light of the Church, and in the safety of the Church, you may confess into the darkness of the world. "This," our text says, "was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him."

Imagine that: going from those so engrossed by sin's darkness that we didn't even know we should be searching; our lineage just sat and dwelt in darkness and believed it to be light, just like we see in so much of our society now relishing and feasting upon the darkness of their lost state... to be sure, a

darkness filled with rationalizations and reasonings to explain the darkness and try to make sense of – even celebrate – darkness!
But darkness nonetheless! And, that was *us*!

But, being brought from that in holy baptism and adoption into the church, we have boldness and confidence in our access to God’s mysterious plan unveiled and shared with us through our faith in Christ, the key to unlock all the inheritance of the saints.

In short, the ‘experience of the Magi’ has nothing on us. True, they were right to rejoice that God gave them the star; and they were most certainly right to seek out the Christ child and adore him with the richest of earthly gifts that paled in comparison to the gifts He would pour out for them. Yes, we can thank God for the Magi, a display of God’s grace to the gentiles. But, even moreso, we can give God thanks for Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, as it demonstrates that the epiphany of our Lord continues to happen in every faithful congregation, for every generation, as our Lord’s Word and Sacrament unveil to us the mysterious plan of salvation in Christ Jesus, so that “through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known” to all powers and principalities on earth and in heaven.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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