

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
5327 W. Washington Blvd.
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

Epiphany Sunday
January 8, 2006
Ephesians 3:2-12

“Epiphany Mysteries”
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

As I was looking at my sermon files this last week, I found quite a number of sermons for the Feast of the Epiphany, which we are privileged to celebrate this weekend (a few days late by the calendar). The actual date for Epiphany is January 6th (last Friday). It was surprising to discover that I had never preached as far as I could tell on the Epistle for Epiphany which will be the text for this sermon. I had mentioned the epistle in several other sermons but never really emphasized it. As I worked more on the text, I perhaps understood why. It is quite easy to preach on the facts of Epiphany, the magi, the star, the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. It is even rather easy to understand the remarkable prophecy of Isaiah 60, the Old Testament Lesson for this day. For it speaks so clearly of the light, of the nations who will come to that light, and again of the gifts that will be brought. Ah, but the Epistle! It is a challenge for us. It is a challenge to a scholar of the Greek language for the Apostle Paul has once again created one of those incredibly complex and difficult sentences in which the parts are intricately connected. (Actually there are two sentences here) And the words that he speaks are not necessarily easy to understand. Yet the main thought of this text can probably be summarized by the word mystery which appears four times in this text. As the mystery is revealed we will learn much of God’s grace for us and for all the world. So let’s consider in the words of our theme for today: “Epiphany Mysteries”.

I. The Mystery Explained

A good argument could be made that there are some mysteries about the event we call Epiphany. Scholars, astronomers, and interested people discuss the star for example. There are several theories about it—but in the final analysis it remains a mystery—a mystery which God Himself used to direct the magi to the Child. Even the magi are a mystery. We know nothing really about their origin, their social standing, their country. When they return to their own country by another route as the Gospel lesson relates, they literally disappear from the pages of history. So that is a mystery as well.

Now that is not the mystery which St. Paul speaks about in the Epistle for today. He refers to it in connection with the “administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you” and writes that it was the mystery made known by revelation. Now a mystery that has been revealed is no longer such. But the apostle goes on to tell his readers that they might understand it—his insight into the mystery of Christ which was not made known to other generations but has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets.

We see that the mystery has its center in Christ. And as the apostle Paul continues in the text,

it also encompasses the Gentiles—all the nations. The mystery is that they are “heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, sharers together in the promise of Christ Jesus.” Now we may take these words as self-evident. But they were startling thoughts at the time of the first Christians. Especially to the Jewish believers these words would have been very difficult to accept. The idea of the Jewish people as God’s own was very strong and of course had strong Scriptural backing. But Paul is insistent here that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, fellow members, fellow sharers of the promise. They are not just second class citizens, but full partakers in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The text continues as the Apostle says that although he is less than the least of all God’s people “this grace was given to me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.” For now, through the church, the body of Christ, “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.”

And this message was earth shattering to the ancient world. Eventually the Roman Empire itself would be changed by this society shaking thought. The Gentiles would embrace the message of the good news. The gospel would be proclaimed and spread. The church would indeed become the steward and dispenser of the manifold wisdom of God. For as our text concludes, in Christ and “through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.” In Christ is freedom—from sin, from despair, from death itself. In Christ, we may boldly ask in His name and stand before God. In Christ the Epiphany mystery is solved.

II. Epiphany Application

You should see by now why these words of St. Paul to the Ephesians were chosen as the epistle for the Feast of the Epiphany. Epiphany has often been called the “Gentile Christmas.” The magi came seeking the king of the Jews, and found instead the king of all. In Him who was born of David’s line is the hope of the world. Epiphany is often associated with light. Of course, the word itself means to “shine forth” so the light connection is an obvious one. But the light that shines is not so much the visible light that we can see (the last weeks of cloudy weather have certainly made us long for a little more sunshine though!). Rather it is the light that shines in our hearts. The light of the gospel of Christ. And that light is shareable. It needs to be shared. It can be shared. Not just in the preaching of a pastor. Not just in the high and lofty words of the Apostle writing this epistle. But it can be shared by each of you as well. It can be shared by all of us together. For the light, the promise, the mystery if you will is of great value to all who would hear it and believe its truth. For the light is salvation. The light is Jesus Christ himself.

That is why Epiphany is also seen as time of missions. It is a time to remember those who go to distant lands with the message. In the prophecy of Isaiah read before, it is stated that

nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Some have interpreted this to mean that the whole world will be drawn to Jerusalem, to Zion, as the place of God's dwelling. That interpretation has some rather sorry consequences as can even be seen in some comments recently made regarding the illness of the prime minister of Israel. For if the light is Christ, that light shines when the message is shared and spread. That light continues to grow and glow in the places around the world where the good news is known or where the good news is planted. And everywhere the light goes, it makes disciples. Everywhere the light shines, it shines into desperate and hurting hearts and turns lives around. It brings joy to the lost and hope to all. That is the mystery. But to us, who are God's own people, it is no mystery any more. We who are instructed by the Word, baptized in the water, fed with the body and blood of Christ in the bread and wine are all partakers in the mystery. The Spirit of God has enlightened us. We know the light of Christ that shines in our hearts. It is the Epiphany light. It will shine forever.

As we will sing at the conclusion of this service:

Then let your Word within me,
shine as the fairest star,
Your reign of love revealing
How wonderful you are.
Help me confess you truly
And with your Christendom
Here own you Lord and Savior
With all the world to come.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.