

The Epiphany of Our Lord

January 7, 2018

Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Ephesians 3:2-12 Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, 3 that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. 4 In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. 6 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.

7 I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. 8 Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, 9 and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. 10 His 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, 11 according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. 12 In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.

"One People in Christ"

Disney is dangerous. Ok, that's a little unfair. There are a lot of wonderful things about fairy tales. Children get to use their imaginations. We want them to dream. To dream big. It's a joy to watch them pursue their ambitions. And yet, if you ask any little girl between the ages of say 3 and 8 what they want to be when they grow up, there's an extremely good chance she will tell you she wants to be a princess. So yes, let her dream. Let her use her imagination. But it's a fairy tale.

For one thing, there aren't too many princesses left in our world today. So there is a very slim chance one of our little girls will actually grow up to become a princess. At them time when there were more kings and queens, princes and princesses, your chances of growing up to become royalty were much smaller. You could stay in school and get an education, but that wouldn't make any difference. You could work hard and follow your dreams, but it wouldn't improve your odds. You were born royalty or you weren't. And the huge, overwhelming majority of the population weren't. They were peasants and would always stay peasants.

And I realize that what I just said is upsetting. We don't like people telling us what we can be or can't do. And that's not just true about three year olds in frilly dresses. One of the more disturbing trends we have seen in our country in recent years is the growing divide between people. Democrats and Republicans. Immigrants and native born. Different races and ethnicities. Different classes and income tax brackets.

So many of these divisions that grow wider and keep people apart come from rivalries. We look at people on the other side as our enemy. Tension builds between people who are different. We treat it like a competition. So much of it, at least from the way I've seen it, is based on fear. If someone gets ahead, they will have to keep me down. If someone else gets an advantage, it's because they are taking advantage of me. And then we start to double down on our identity. We feel like we have to up our own value, boost our own worth, increase our own importance. Our group has to go up compared to everyone else. If that means they have to go down, well, then that's just reality.

You can compare it to sibling rivalry. On Christmas morning one child opens her gifts. As soon as her brother opens his, they immediately start comparing. Who got the better gift? Whose gift is worth more? And that becomes a dangerous thing when it turns into a rivalry for God's favor. We want to be on God's good side. We want to be getting gifts from God. We want to be assured of God's love for us. And Ephesians chapter three tells us it doesn't have to come at the expense of others. Actually, we are one people in Christ.

The Apostle Paul calls this beautiful truth a mystery. He says: **"This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body."** (Ephesians 3:6) This mystery isn't some manifesto that erases class divisions and gives all people the same amount of money and power. The mystery doesn't mean closing your eyes and pretending naively that all people are exactly the same. Or even that we should be exactly the same.

A mystery is not the same as a secret. A secret is something you have exclusive access to and you don't want to tell too many people about it. You want to guard it and keep it and keep it from everyone else. A mystery is just something that hasn't been revealed yet.

Some of you are familiar with the movie "A Christmas Story." Throughout the movie the main character Ralphie lets everyone know that he wants a Red Ryder air rifle. But every adult he tells about this special wish tells him that he will shoot his eye out if he actually gets it. Then on Christmas morning as the boy is prepared for the letdown, his last present just happens to be the Red Rider. Watching that scene not only made me think about how special one gift could be for a little boy, but also how difficult it must have been for the boy's father to keep the gift a secret. God wasn't trying to keep secrets. He just wanted to unwrap his special gift to the human race at just the right time for maximum impact.

The difference is this gift doesn't depend of whether you've been naughty or nice. God's gift to you isn't about what you deserve, but what you need. And it's not what you need in the sense of those practical gifts like power tools or kitchen appliances or warm sweaters. God's gift to you is his own Son, Jesus.

The mystery God reveals at Epiphany is Jesus for you. Jesus for me. Jesus for all people. Ephesians 3:6 says it this way: **"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."** All those things that cause divisions among us, don't matter to God. Whatever we would claim for ourselves to boost ourselves over someone else is

irrelevant to God. Your heritage and your family history don't bring you closer to God just because of your birth. Your performance and track record don't make you more or less deserving of God's love. Inclusion in any group doesn't earn you points with God. Being kept out and shut out from privileges doesn't make it harder for God to rescue you. People who trace their heritage back to Abraham and those who never heard of him are in the same situation. They are all saved equally in the same way by Jesus. That's the mystery. Not a secret. Just unveiled and unwrapped at just the right time. Jesus came for all people regardless of your background. Jesus lived his perfect life for everyone who was born with every advantage and those who never had a fair shot at life. Jesus kept to God's plan of salvation for every single person in the world.

God's star chose people to bring them to Jesus. We don't really know much about them. We call them wise men. But the Bible's technical term for them is magi. So they could just as easily be astrologers or philosophers or sorcerers. We don't know where they came from or how many they were. But they come from some distant eastern land. They journey for miles to a place that would have been at the bottom of holiday destination sites. And there they are in the same room with Mary and Joseph offering their gifts and worship to Jesus.

Sometimes when families give gifts they are very careful to give the exact same amount or identical quality of gifts to each family member, just to keep things fair and even. But then there are gifts that are for the entire family. A new puppy. Camping equipment. A new TV. They are for everyone but not always appreciated or used by each family member equally.

But God's gifts to you in Jesus Christ have a different appeal. They are more like the gifts a community would get if there were no more drunk driving and no drug dealing. This is what the good news of Jesus unveils for us: **"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."** (Ephesians 3:6) The Apostle Paul has to actually invent his own words to describe some of the benefits we have in Jesus. Adopted into God's family gives every believer the same eternal inheritance. No favoritism. No different amounts or degrees of favor from God. We are joined together in one body when we are brought into the body of Christ. So instead of rivalries and tensions that feed off our differences, we have a beautiful unity in Christ that trumps every other distinction. We are co-sharers or co-partakers in the promises that come to us in Jesus. We all draw from this limitless well of blessings that we all share in Christ.

Then the Apostle Paul uses grace in a way that isn't typical. Grace is God's undeserved love for sinners. Usually that refers to the way God brings us into a saving relationship through Jesus Christ. Here, Paul says God's grace gives him a purpose and direction in life: **"Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless 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."** (Ephesians 3:8,9) The good news of Jesus make every person a minister or servant of that good news. The good news becomes our master. The good news is what we proclaim and give away. God served us by giving Jesus. That good news gives us a servant mentality to serve God and God's people.

Paul calls it **“the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you.”** (Ephesians 3:2) Administration is a rather cold term. We picture an office work shuffling papers and making sure policies are followed with precision. Instead, this term describes someone who is put in charge of a large estate. In the sense of the gospel, it means we are privileged to be part of something special and unique. The privilege is not just that we have it but that we also get to share it. God shows his grace to others through us.

That’s because God’s grace is different than any department store bargain or online flash sale. In those cases we worry about sharing that great deal with too many people for fear that the store will run out, the shelves will be bare by the time we get around to taking advantage of it. But God’s grace is limitless. His love for sinners boundless. We have and share this simple truth from God: **“And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”** (Acts 2:21) The same offer that applies to us applies to every person on the planet: **“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”** (Ephesians 2:8,9)

You wish it wasn’t true, but sometimes you feel like you never escape high school. High school has all those different groups and designations to label people: jocks and cheerleaders, nerds and geeks, band kids and teacher’s pets. But those aren’t exactly rigid groups you put yourself into, like a party affiliation. And lots of people feel like they don’t fit in perfectly with any single group, like you don’t fit in anywhere.

God’s grace provides a unity no one else would have dreamed of. Who would have imagined God’s grace for the person who slaps God in the face with a blatant lie is just the same as God’s grace for the one who spits in God’s face with no interest in things spiritual? Or that God sent his own Son for all the parents who strive to be perfect but fall slightly short just as much as God sent his only Son for those who abandoned their responsibility as parents? Who would have predicted Jesus gave up his life in sacrifice for those who consider themselves nice but hide their secret resentment toward the naughty crowd just as much as Jesus gave himself up for those who know they are worthless and unworthy, feel they can’t ever be loved or valued?

In God’s grace you have an identity and purpose. You are his loved child. God valued you enough to give up his only Son for you. You are privileged with the infinite grace of your loving God. You have access to your heavenly Father. You have freedom to come to him and speak your mind to him and the confidence he will listen. You have the boldness of faith. You might never come close to achieving a Disney-like dream. But you have something better through Jesus Christ. You can celebrate with the Apostle Paul and all believers that you have God’s grace. You are adopted into God’s family and share in a beautiful mystery revealed in Jesus. You and I and all believers are God’s one people in Christ. Amen.