

Make Known the Mystery!

A sermon based on Ephesians 3:2-12.

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

I have an extremely important question to ask you this morning. By a show of hands, how many of you have seen the new Star Wars movie? Great, now I know who not to talk to for the next 4-6 months.

I'm just kidding. I haven't seen it yet – Becky's not a huge Star Wars fan, and yes, I love her in spite of it – and I probably won't see it til it comes out on video. And well, I'm one of those who prefer not to know what's going to happen until I can see it myself (as you might already know from football season and my sometimes impassioned pleas with some not to tell me anything about a Packers games)! And you might be the same as well. Who doesn't love a good mystery?

Today is Epiphany. We hear that word and we often think of the day, but the word literally refers to a moment of sudden revelation of something that was previously unknown...a mystery. And today, Epiphany, it's all about the mystery, revealed, made known...a mystery accomplished by Christ, announced by the gospel, administered by the church...you and me.

Hope that wasn't too much of a spoiler!

If you look again at our verses from Ephesians 3, there are a couple key words Paul highlights here and uses multiple times – *mystery* and *revelation/revealed*. These are his key thoughts. So, what was the mystery that had been revealed to Paul and that he was now revealing to others? It's not the mystery of the coming of the Christ...that mystery was solved at Christmas...at Jesus' birth.

No, what does Paul write here? ***"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."***

Do you get it? It wasn't that Paul was saying, now, with the coming of Christ, Gentiles could come to faith...or, that now, Jesus had come as the Savior for all the nations...to save even the Gentiles. You saw in our first lesson how Ruth, a Moabitess, not only came to saving faith in Jesus but was even blessed by God to be a part of Jesus' family tree. That Gentiles would come to faith had been anticipated...recorded in Scripture...so not a mystery to Jews in Paul's time.

But that they would be entirely joined to the Jews, and so intimately (***"heirs together...members together...sharers together..."***) was not anticipated. Those words would likely have had to come as a surprise to so many of Paul's Jewish contemporaries. You know how well documented the hatred between the Jews and Samaritans was. You know how the Jews wouldn't associate with anyone who wasn't circumcised or who ate meat that wasn't kosher. You know how the Jews wouldn't even allow the Gentiles to even come into the temple courts. You know Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. You know the account of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, how even his disciples somewhat bristled and chided Jesus for talking to her.

But now, Paul echoing similar words from his letter to the Galatians, where he said, ***“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ,”*** that was the mystery of God’s grace, finally coming to light, finally revealed to all people, finally made known.

Is that a mystery to you? I’ll admit...it’s not much of a spoiler. More like, thanks, Captain Obvious. In our day we tend to take it for granted that Gentiles are full heirs, members and sharers of the gospel promise. I mean, most of us here would be considered Gentiles, unless you have Jewish blood in you. In fact, we may have even come “full circle” in that we now may regard a Jewish Christian as the rare, unexpected exception in the predominantly Gentile world of modern Christianity. And so, it’s not a surprise, it’s not a shock, it’s not a mystery to us, as it would have been to the first century church.

Maybe it would be akin to saying to a congregation full of lifetime WELSers, “There are other people outside of the WELS who are going to be in heaven.” And we would say, “But wait, WELS teaches the entire Word of God in its truth and purity while other church bodies don’t. You’re telling me some people from those churches will be in heaven?!?”

Let’s talk about elitism. You know what that is, don’t you? It’s someone who considers themselves (or is considered by others) to be superior, a notch above everyone else, whether it’s because of their intellect, wealth, power, talent, social standing. The Jews during Jesus’ time and even up to Paul’s writing these words had an air of elitism around them. We saw some examples of that a couple minutes ago. They did not consider the Gentiles to be in their atmosphere because they weren’t God’s chosen people, they were mixed bloods, they were heathens, they were unworthy.

Is that a threat with you? With me? With us? Friends, today is Epiphany. This is the Gentile Christmas. Today is the reminder Jesus has come for the world. He’s the Savior for everyone in the world. How are we doing in revealing that mystery?

I think a knock against churches in our church body is that we’re often too content and comfortable with staying how we are...which is often appealing mostly to conservative, Midwesterners with a German or some kind of Scandanavian lineage...or to people who have some kind of WELS background already. And there’s nothing wrong with that.

But does that sometimes prevent us from getting out there and sharing Jesus with everyone? The co-worker who’s having problems with her girlfriend, she’s not the type I should be telling about Jesus...she won’t belong at church. The homeless person who wanders into the gas station as I’m paying for my gas, asks me if I have some spare change, well, obviously they’re not going to any sort of financial blessing to our congregation, so is he worth my time...is he worthy of Jesus? The friends I’ve had for year, maybe even since we were little, but I would much rather preserve our relationship, so I’ve never even thought/dared to invite them to church. It’s like, I have this picture of the ideal person who should be at this church, and you don’t fit it. That would be elitism...to say or think, “You’re not deserving of the best thing out there...Jesus.”

Or, maybe you don’t think that way, and I hope you don’t. But does inactivity say anything different? I know I’ve always been a strong advocate of friendship evangelism, that you will know just as many people who need Jesus in their lives as I do, and that makes you a great option to go and be his witness to them. But, if you’re going to be honest with yourself, as I have to be with myself, have we really done that great of a job at that? Or, when it comes to Jesus, are we a bit more subdued, tentative, timid,

quiet? And does that really say anything different than purposely avoiding talking to people about Jesus because we don't think they should belong?

What's the reality? In God's eyes, we should be no different. We're nothing more than second class citizens, Gentiles, heathens, unworthy, undeserving, should-be cast-offs, left in the darkness of unbelief. That's no mystery.

And here's no mystery...***"through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise of Christ Jesus."*** That includes you! The very fact that you hear the message of the gospel is proof of God's desire to have you and his desire to call you by that message. It's for you, otherwise you wouldn't have heard it.

And this isn't because you're part of an elite group. It's not because you've shown something even remotely worthwhile to God. No, you are an heir, you are a member, you are a sharer in God's promises because of what has been accomplished for you by Christ.

And again, his history, his ministry is well-documented. It's no mystery. Jesus was a man who would associate with the poor, the sick, tax collectors, even Samaritans (heathens) all considered the lowest of the low...because he had come to save them too.

We belong in that group, where Jesus not only associated with us. He lived for us. He died for us. He rose for us. He lived a life of humble and perfect service to his Father – God – on our behalf, because we haven't. He died on the cross, treated as the lowest of the low, the worst of sinners, which he really was, as he suffered and died and endured God's eternal wrath for all of our sins...all that so he could win our forgiveness. And he rose from the dead to show he will one day raise us up from this world of sin to live with him forever...our eternal inheritance. He's our Savior. He's the world's Savior.

And this gift of his grace, which has been accomplished for you and me and the world by Christ, announced/revealed to us by the gospel, it is now to be administered by the church...by you and me.

It was Paul's privilege and passion to make plain to everyone how the sins of the world were taken away in Christ. Unlike a sweepstakes offer which tells us we may have already won, he announced we have already won through the Savior. Paul does not suppress this fact; he shouts it from the rooftops. It is part of his mission to "shed a floodlight," or as the NIV translates it, "make plain" God's gracious, eternal plan.

And now it gets to be our privilege and passion, too. Is God's gift of grace through Jesus still a mystery? To many, it still is. Today, I say, "Spoil it!"

You know what that's like. It's kind of like a good book or movie or Packers game I haven't been able to watch yet, you're in the middle of it or you have yet to begin, and someone casually says, "Oh, just you wait, or, I can't believe this happened," and then they proceed to tell you and ruin the surprise. There's this sports radio podcast I was listening to a few months back, and it was the morning after an episode of Game of Thrones, a widely popular TV show these days. The hosts were talking about how they hadn't seen it yet, were going to watch it later that morning or in the afternoon, and then they had a regular guest come on, and at his sign-off he said, "I'm going to give you a little spoiler...the bad guys got a dragon," which, I heard, was much more than tiny spoiler, more like the biggest part of the show. And oh, how hilarious it was to hear the hosts hem and haw about how he had ruined it for them.

That's not the case with this mystery, revealed to us by God in his grace, revealed to all in the good news of his Word, the mystery accomplished for us and all people by Christ. Again, I say, spoil it. Think about it. We have the unsearchable riches, the gift of God's grace...that allows us now to approach God with freedom from sin and confidence in his love and care for us.

You know, we're "spoiling it" for someone if we *don't* tell them the climax of God's mystery in Christ...how God's grace is for them.

We don't want that, so what can we do? Friends, be different, be intentional, be confident, be joyful. If you're like me, it's sometimes so easy and comfortable to close up and clam up when opportunities arise to talk about Jesus with other people.

Be different. Be willing to step outside your comfort zone. Invite the friend to church. Join us for one of our canvassing trips. See someone going through a rough time, tell them you'll pray for them...even better, pray for them right there...best of all, share some of Jesus' promises and the news of his salvation with them.

Doing that means being intentional. Put yourself into positions (and expect to be in positions) where you get to spoil the good news of the gospel. Seek them out.

And be confident. You know the mystery. You know the unsearchable riches of Christ. You have the best news, news that can change a person's heart. You merely have to share it.

So be joyful. You have life-altering news. You have the greatest privilege. And, whether successful or not, you can rejoice because you have done your duty. You have served your Lord.

Now, if you told me some huge spoilers from the Last Jedi, I'd probably quickly give you one of these, but in the long run, it's not life or death if I know what happens. Well, today is Epiphany. God has opened our eyes. The mystery of his grace has been accomplished by Christ. It's been revealed to us by the gospel. Will you join me in spoiling it for others? Because it will be life or death if they know/don't know what happens. We choose life, so let's go and share it! Amen.