

**GOD DIDN'T FORGET ABOUT US**  
**Second Sunday after Christmas – EPIPHANY**  
**January 3 & 4, 2004**  
**St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Watertown, WI**  
**Pastor Bill Heiges**

Thank God. He has transferred us from the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of the Son whom he loves. Amen.

The Word of God which I have the privilege of sharing with you as we celebrate The Epiphany of Our Lord is something Paul wrote to the **Ephesians, chapter 3:2-6**. Paul wrote:

**Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you,**

**that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly.**

**In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ,**

**which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.**

**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.**

This is the Word of our Lord. Amen.

My dear friends, have you ever felt like you didn't fit, like you were left out or unwanted, on the outside looking in? Have you ever felt like you were forgotten, like you didn't matter? I can remember growing up how during recess or in gym class there'd always be two people picked to be captains, and then they would pick which people they wanted to be on their team. I can remember looking into the faces of those who were less athletically gifted – their faces were one of hopeful expectation that soon turned to dejection because of the rejection they received. There was always someone picked last. And the message is always clear – I don't want you on my team.

My heart went out for people like that, and I found myself picking them to be on my team and telling them, "You do matter – you are important, I want you on my team." I did that when I coached grade school basketball too. I made sure that everybody had playing time, even those who couldn't put a ball in a hoop if you lowered it five feet. I wanted them to know, "You are an important part of the team – you do matter, you do count." That is God's message to you and me as we celebrate the Epiphany of our Lord.

The Epiphany used to be the second most celebrated festival in the church year, second in importance only to Easter. It was more important than even Christmas was. It is called "the Gentiles' Christmas" in which God was revealing that his salvation wasn't just for a select few or one-chosen nation, but for all people. The word Epiphany means revelation, a revelation or uncovering of something that had been hidden.

Epiphany is God's way of saying to us Gentiles that we are not on the outside looking in. God says to you and me, "I didn't forget about you, you do matter, you do count. I, your God care about you." Epiphany is thus known for the bright and brilliant light, the light that focuses on Jesus Christ.

You see God had a plan and as he looked into our world, he saw darkness – the darkness of sin and evil and unbelief; and God had a plan to send a light, a light to lighten the Gentiles. That plan was to bring light to our dark world. We heard that in Isaiah, chapter 60. It's also mentioned in several other spots in Isaiah. In Isaiah 9:2, he says, **"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."**

We see on the night our Savior was born angels appearing to shepherds when the hosts of heaven opened up and a bright light shown upon them, and the glory of the Lord was revealed to them that **Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.** (Luke 2:11) Later on God placed a star, a bright star in the sky that would lead to an even brighter Star in a manger, the gift of his Son. It led Gentile wise men, Magi (the ancient priests-scholars) to the place where the Savior was born, revealing to them and to us that God sent his Son for all people.

Paul, in this part of God's Word tells us that he had a role in the big picture of God's plan of salvation. Now, he was perhaps the most unlikely person we would have chosen to play a part in the role of the spreading of the Gospel. He was, after all, the one who hated and persecuted Christians every chance he got, an enemy of God's people; but he was the one God chose. Paul said, "I have been given the task of preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles," (Gal 2:7).

When God struck Paul down with brilliant light on the road to Damascus, God revealed to Paul and to Ananias why he was choosing Paul. He says, **"Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings....."** (Acts 9:15) Paul understood his role and his responsibility. He talks about the administration of God's grace that has been given to me for you – for your benefit. The administration of God's grace – that word is often used for stewardship. Paul recognized that what God had given him was a stewardship, a responsibility to administer, to make known to all the Gentiles God's grace in Jesus Christ.

Now Paul understood that role. He understood what he had been saved from and what he had been saved for. I think you and I know what we've been saved from. We've heard over and over again: we've been saved from our sins; we've been saved from the devil; we've been saved from hell and death by the work of Jesus Christ. But I don't know whether we're always so clear on what we've been saved for. See, Paul knew what he had been saved from. He knew that he was the chief of sinners; he knew that he was the least of the apostles, he knew what he had done, and he knew the grace that covered over his sins. He knew that he was an example of God's mercy, that there is no one beyond help, no one beyond saving by the power of God.

But he also knew what he had been saved for – that God had a plan and a purpose for his life. Do you realize that you also are a part of God's plan and purpose, that you have a role in the administration of his grace? Now once you know what you have been given in Christ - the

Gospel, the gift of God's grace – you and I have a responsibility to dispense and share it with others. Paul knew what he had been saved for.

He had been entrusted with the mystery of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He said, "This mystery had been given to me by revelation." – the revelation of Jesus Christ speaking to him personally on the road to Damascus revealing to him that I'm the one you've been persecuting. Now I want you to bear my name to all people. Later on Jesus would reveal to Paul in greater depth and detail what He wanted him to know and do.

There is so much that God wants to reveal to you and to me about his plan and his purpose for our life, his plan and his purpose for this church and our ministry and the role and responsibility everyone of us has in it. It was time, Paul said, for the mystery to be revealed. He said, "In the past it had been **not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.**"

Do you love a good mystery? Most people do whether it's a novel or a TV show. You see all of the clues as they slowly unfold; and finally there is someone like a Sherlock Holmes who comes at the end and he connects all the dots, brings all the clues together; and we arrive at the conclusion of the plot. The mystery is revealed. Well, that's God's Old Testament. All of the clues were there, slowly being revealed, slowly unfolding over time until now the mystery has been revealed. That which was hidden had been uncovered and made known for all people.

You see a mystery is a truth not commonly known before the apostles and the prophets. A mystery is a truth that cannot be discovered by human reason. Man cannot know Christ apart from the Spirit revealing Christ to us. It doesn't come naturally to us. In fact, you look at all other religions in our world today, by nature they understand that they have to appease their god, they have to satisfy him, they have to do more and more if they want to get into whatever nirvana or heaven or right relationship with their god. No, by nature we understand, like Paul said earlier in Ephesians 2, that we were objects of God's wrath. Why? Because we lived in darkness because we followed the ways of this world, because we lived among the disobedient and that we were living to gratify the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. That's what we were like by nature – blind, dead, unable to know God or know his love unless God were to reveal it to us. Like that present that was unwrapped (in the children's sermon) before, God unwrapped the gift of his love, the gift of his Son; and so this mystery is a truth that has to be revealed by God if it were to be known by us; and God has done just that.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, **No eye has seen, no ear had heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him – but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.** (1 Cor. 2:9,10) Thank God we know what we know. Thank God we know what we have in Christ. He calls it later on "**the unsearchable riches of Christ**" (Eph. 3:8). All that God has he gives to us freely in his Son, Jesus Christ. He wants that to be ours; he wants us to be his. That is the mystery that God has made known. The clues were there in the Old Testament, slowly being unfolded. God had told Abraham (Gen 22:18), "In your seed (in your one physical descendant) all nations of the earth will be blessed". He said in the book of Isaiah that this Messiah, when he comes, would be a light to lighten the Gentiles that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.

With a few minor exceptions, God's Old Testament people neglected to share this good news with the other nations around them. They kept it to themselves. They selfishly hoarded this message that God planned to be made known to all people. But Paul says we are now in a new era, a New Testament era. It had not been previously revealed as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. And what is the mystery? The mystery is that through the Gospel the Gentiles (that's people like you and me) are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body and sharers together in the promise of Christ.

He says I have already written briefly about this to you. I want you to know the deep insight I have into this mystery. In the previous chapter, Paul had said **remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in this world.** We were on the outside looking in. **But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have now been brought near through the blood of Christ.** He said that Christ **himself is our peace.** (Eph. 2:12-14). He has made peace between God and us so that peace can exist between us and each other. He has broken down the dividing wall of hostility that existed between us and God; He broke it down by His cross. He reconciled us to God – not just us, but all people - to God through the cross. All of this happens through the cross. The cross is the great equalizer among men.

I once read of a judge who knelt at a communion rail right next to an ex-convict that he had sentenced to prison. Later on someone came up and asked the judge what was going through his mind as he knelt next to a man that he had sent to prison. And the judge said, "Well, before the cross we are all the same." He understood that there is no difference, for all have sinned and all fall short of the glory of God; and that same all are justified and saved freely by the grace that comes through Christ Jesus. And that is what Paul was saying Epiphany is all about.

It's about the fact that there are no classes in Christianity, no people who are higher or lower. We are all members together of the same body, heirs together, he said. Now that was hard for the New Testament church to accept. They wrestled with this truth. The Gentiles should now be accepted on the same level, on the same basis as Jewish Christians! But as they searched the Scriptures, they discovered that had been God's plan all along, that there weren't to be special rules for Gentiles, special hoops that they had to go through. No, they were accepted by God's grace, cleansed by Christ blood the same way you and I are. And they are members of the same body, like the apple tree that one man took where he had grafted a branch from a peach tree and a branch from a pear tree into the apple tree, putting them into the slits and taping them up and watching them heal until later when that tree bore fruit, it bore apples, peaches, and pears. And so God brings into his one body the diversity of all different kinds of cultures and people groups.

The glimpse we have of heaven is that there will be people from every nation, tribe, language, and people groups standing before the throne of God and praising him for the gift of his grace that accepts them all at the same level. We have that happening right here at St. Mark's with our Spanish speaking brothers and sisters. They are not a lesser congregation than us older English-speaking Christians with German roots. They are not beneath us who have been maybe life-long

members of St. Mark's. No, God accepts them on the same level as he does you and me. They are sharers together in the promise that is ours in Christ.

We heard that last year when those Hmong pastors – guys that could barely stand above that lectern – share the good news of Jesus Christ and what God was doing among their Hmong brothers and sisters in the Twin Cities. We have the privilege of supporting the work of people like Pastor Solomon over in India as he shares the Gospel of good news with thousands of people in that culture. It's happening in Africa and in Apache land and all over our world. God wants all people to come to the truth that Jesus is their Savior too. And you and I have now been entrusted with the administration, the stewardship of God's grace. God puts the Gospel in our hearts, and he puts it into our hands; and he says I want you to dispense it and to share it with others. And there is but one thing that God requires of those who have been given the trust and that is that they prove themselves faithful. That is why we get actively involved in the mission of the church, like so many of our members do in our Hispanic outreach ministry. That's why we support mission work with our prayers and with our offerings.

We at St. Mark's have a responsibility and accountability to God for what he has given us as a congregation; and each of us who believe, who have been brought into the kingdom of God and made children of God by faith in Christ, also have been given a trust. We remember what Peter wrote, **"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy"** (1 Pe 2:9-10). The Gospel that has changed our lives and our eternal destinies has been placed into our hands.

I want you to know this one thing before you leave today that you are not on the outside looking in, that **God has brought you in by the blood of Jesus Christ**. You are God's child, he loves you, and he cares about you, and he wants you to be with him for eternity.

And I want you to do one thing. **I want you to share that message with someone else**. Share it with your family, share it with your friends. I want you to tell them what I just told you, what God tells you in this word. I want you to write down the names of five people that you know in your life who are without God and without hope. They might be someone you work with, go to school with or live next to. Pray for them.

When you have the opportunity, tell them the reason for the hope that you have in Christ when they ask you. I want your life to be a light to them that brings glory to God. And I want you to invite them and bring them in. As you hold out and share the good news with them, remember God did not forget about you; he brought you in, and he wants to use you and me to bring them in too because he has not forgotten about them either. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all knowledge, shall guard your heart and your mind in Christ Jesus. Amen.