

Sermon: Epiphany
Theme: Living the Mystery
Text: Ephesians 3:2-12

² 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.

Many of us like to watch or read murder mysteries. I can rattle off the ones that I love- Ian Rankin novels, shows like Vera, Shetland, Endeavour, and a rather quirky one from New Zealand called the Brokenwood Mysteries. All these are mysteries that get solved. They begin with a tragic event-a murder has been committed. Who was responsible? We are on the side of the detectives who are untangling the threads of this crime and determining who might be responsible. There's a sense of satisfaction when the mystery is revealed, and the guilty person is charged.



Mystery. It's a delicious and intriguing word. Perhaps we all have the sense that our lives, indeed our world, contain deep and perplexing mysteries. There's the complexity and beauty of creation, but also the reality of evil and its effect on our world that we find impossible to fathom. We look for explanations or deeply hidden patterns that enable us to understand why things are the way they are.

When I was younger, there was a sense that science would dispel the need for mystery. We would all worship at the altar of rationality instead. But that's not what's happened. We now live in a period known as post-modernity. We understand that the world is incredibly complex, and there are no easy answers. Chaos, disorder, mystery are givens.

The other thing that might surprise you if you are my age or older is that younger generations are much more comfortable with this than we are. Hugh Mackay, the Australian social researcher, observed that Gen Z, those who are later teenagers and young adults today, hold these three things to be most important: community, commitment and mystery. It seems to me that the church has been created to major in those three things. Which is perhaps why other research shows that this generation is far more open to the claims of Christianity and more willing to give the church a try than my generation and beyond.

Slide 4

As we heard today in our second reading, we have good news for people who desire this sense of mystery, people who hanker after something deeper than what they can buy, people who aren't satisfied with the surface level stuff. The time is right, always right, to reveal the "the mystery of Christ."

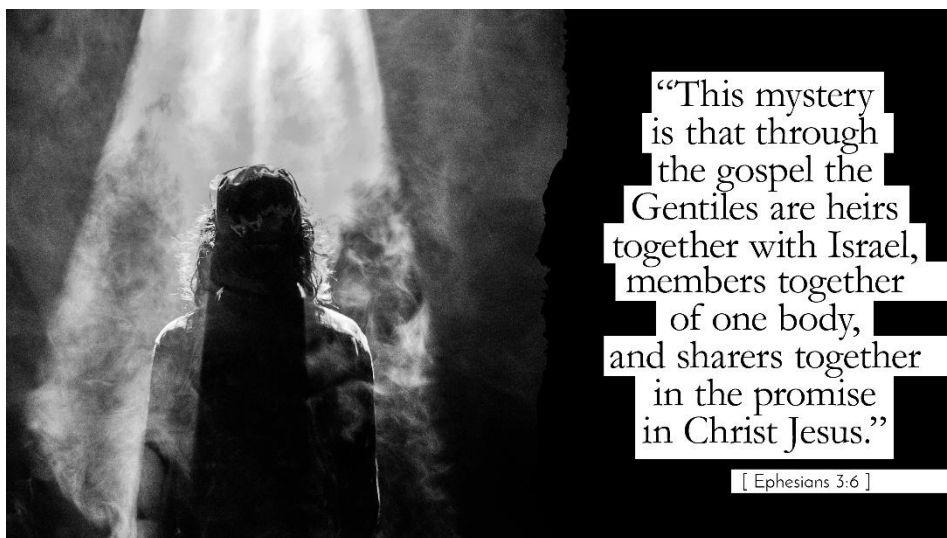


Today we celebrate the festival of the Epiphany, which fell on January 6th. The word 'epiphany' means "the revealing of something that was hidden." In this great festival of the church year, we rejoice in the unfolding of God's mysterious plan to reconcile the world to himself. We rejoice in the birth of Jesus Christ, the fulfilment of God's promise, and the key to this mystery.

So what do we mean by mystery? In the first place, a mystery is not a secret. A secret remains a secret only for as long as you don't know what it is. When you find it out, it's gone. But a mystery is something that keeps on giving, even when it has been revealed. We talk about the mystery of love. We know what it is, but we can't really explain it, or explain it away. It continues to confound and entice us. There will never be a scientific theory that can make sense of it. So it is of the mystery of God's love revealed in his Son Jesus.

The birth of Christ brings to light the "**mystery which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.**" From the beginning of time, God launched a rescue plan for fallen humanity. In times past, God tantalised his people with glimpses into the nature of this mystery through the promises given through his prophets. Perhaps you could call these a series of controlled leaks, to bring hope to those who despaired about God's apparent lack of concern for the messy world. God intimates his plan to the prophet Isaiah with these words about the promised Messiah: '**I will make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.**'

Secondly, this mystery is different from the ones that we see played out on our TV screens. When these mysteries are solved, there is still the reality of a death, and the grief that flows from this. There's no joy or lasting resolution. Contrast this with the mystery about which Paul writes. This mystery does involve the death of the main character, Jesus Christ. And there is more than one guilty person. Each one of us are culpable because of our sin. What makes this mystery different is that it is solved by the innocent one taking on our guilt and serving the sentence of death that we deserved. It's a totally unexpected and unfathomable twist in the tale, made even more wondrous by Jesus' resurrection. What a transformative mystery. Through this act of sacrifice and love, God changes broken lives through the good news of forgiveness and changes the world, person by precious person.



Paul writes, "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." We might be thinking to ourselves, "What's mysterious about this?" Perhaps we know story too

well, and we've lost our sense of wonder, love and praise about the God who laid his life on the line to reconcile all creation to himself. The church lives in constant danger of domesticating the good news played out in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

We forget, first of all, that we are people about whom Paul is writing today. We are the Gentiles, those on the outside from God's first covenant, who have gained "every spiritual blessing in Christ." God has "predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ...In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace...by grace, you have been saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God." What changing, spirit uplifting words.

And if we lose our sense of wonder and gratitude at this, then of course we will also forget what role God has given his church, even our congregation, in the ongoing revealing of this mystery for the sake of the world.

Paul writes, "God's 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, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord." The festival of Epiphany brings to light what God has created the church for-to unleash this mystery of his love through Jesus to the world through us, a "sinful sort of saintly band" People who may feel singularly unqualified, and yet have been given everything we need in our baptism and in the good news that constantly nourished us.

Revealing this mystery begins with what we are doing today. Celebrating it, receiving this grace that God promises through his messenger Paul in the good news spoken over us in forgiveness, that will be touched and tasted by us in the body and blood of our ever-living Saviour Jesus Christ, in the bread and wine. God doesn't want this mystery to simply be inside information for a chosen few, but the story that brings life and hope to all people, not just those who sit in the pews on Sunday.

What might be old news to us is still unknown to so many people. The church is commissioned with the call to reveal this mystery to all people, knowing full well that the power of the mystery lies not in our telling of it, but in the mystery itself. The simple actions that we take in sharing the mystery of God's love in Christ with others have implications far beyond the circle of family and friends, or our



community. Our revealing of this mystery brings home to the heavenly forces seeking to subvert God's gracious will that God has indeed won the victory. That's something we all desperately need to hear as the brokenness of this beautiful world and the effects of human sin drain people of hope, and a future.

The festival of Epiphany draws us out of ourselves. Didn't God compel the foreign wise men to come and worship Christ, the "**child born king of the Jews**"? Isn't God saying to us that nation and race is no boundary to his love and grace? Are we not God's torchbearers, the source of light to many who live in darkness? Isn't God's church, this congregation, a place of **community, commitment and mystery**, the very qualities many in our culture are looking for?

Live the mystery of God's all-embracing love for the world. Live it here in our public worship. Live it each day as your life shines the light of Christ into all the corners of your world. Let your "**light shine, so that they people may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.**" Through Jesus Christ, God's mystery revealed. Amen.

Peace in Christ

Pastor Andrew Brook