

“Light for the Whole Wide World”
January 5, 2020 (Epiphany Sunday)
St. Paul’s UCC Church
Rev. Mary Beth Mardis-LeCroy

Ephesians 3:1-12

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles — for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

“Here comes Santa Claus! Here comes Santa Claus! Right down Santa Claus Lane!”

“I’m dreaming of White Christmas...”

“Have a holly jolly Christmas! It’s the best time of the year!”

I know, I know! So annoying, right? Christmas is supposed to be over by now. So why is your nutty pastor still singing Christmas songs?

Contrary to popular belief, Christmas is not just one day – it’s twelve days! It’s a season, actually, from December 25 to the day of Epiphany, which always falls on January 6. (So tomorrow is the actual day of Epiphany). But, even here in the church, we’re usually ready for Christmas to be over way before January 6. We stop listening to Christmas music, we throw away our trees, we pack up our ornaments; *we are done!* Even here in the church, we’re usually ready to wash our hands of Christmas well before the season is actually over.

But we are in good company when we honor all twelve days of Christmas; and we're in *especially* good company when we celebrate Epiphany. Did you know that, in the early church, the day of Epiphany was even more important than Christmas day itself? That's hard to imagine, isn't it? But it's true. Historically-speaking, Epiphany has always been an important day in the church – one of *the* most important. And I hope we hold on to it, because the message of Epiphany is so important to who we are.

Epiphany. What does that word even mean, anyway? One pretty good definition of an epiphany is “a moment of revelation and insight.”¹ An epiphany is a light-bulb moment, a moment of clarity, a moment of illumination. An epiphany is an “ah-ha!” moment.

But what, exactly, is the “epiphany” here, here in the church? What is *our* “ah-ha!” moment? What is our revelation?

Hmm. Maybe Paul's letter to the Ephesians can help us out.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians was originally written to Gentile Christians – to non-Jews, in other words – who had come to trust in Jesus Christ. So the whole book is a sort of... welcome letter, describing all of the blessings and benefits that these Gentile Christians can now claim in Jesus Christ.

And the letter opens with a bang. In the Greek, the entire reading for this morning is one enormous run-on sentence. It seems that Paul is trying to express something of the riches of God's grace in Christ, and you get the sense that the task is so overwhelming that he becomes breathless, piling word upon word and phrase upon phrase as he attempts to express something of the fullness of God's grace.

And he does pretty well. The blessings described in Ephesians are staggering: If you trust in Christ, that means that you are united with Christ, chosen by God to be made holy and blameless. God's love has freed you from the power of sin and death, adopted you into the family of God, and made you a daughter or a son of the Most High. No wonder Paul is out of breath!

But it doesn't stop there. Beginning in the second paragraph of our assigned reading for today, Ephesians shifts its focus from our personal blessings to our place in the larger purpose of God. God is not interested in just blessing you or just blessing me. There is a whole big broken world out there: sin-scarred and scattered and divided and wrecked, a world where people hate and kill each other for no good reason; a world where some go hungry while others are full; a world where sin destroys precious people made in the image of God.

Paul writes, “Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all

¹ See <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/epiphany>.

things...” Remember one of our earlier definitions for “epiphany” – a moment of revelation? Well, *our* epiphany, the church’s epiphany, is God’s revelation to heal the whole wide wounded world – *all* of it! – to pick up its shattered pieces and put them back together again. God has a plan to transform all things. Ah-ha!

That is the church’s epiphany. That is our revelation: that God is intent on making the whole world new. And *this* epiphany, *this* revelation, is radical, world-altering: Jesus of Nazareth, God-in-the-flesh, is not just for us, not just for the so-called “chosen ones.” No; Jesus is for the whole world –for the stranger, the foreigner, the other, the outsider, the refugee. God in Christ has a plan, not just for us, but for all the world.

Paul gives us a larger vision than most of us can fathom – a Gospel about a God who loves and who lays claim to everything that exists. And Ephesians challenges us to see that vision, to have that light-bulb moment for ourselves; and then maybe even to invite other people to pursue it with us.

And that means evangelism. Yes, the “e” word. I know that word may make a lot of us nervous. But let’s be clear: I’m not talking about bullying people into the kingdom of God. Some people think that that is what it means to share your faith, and so they never share their faith at all. But there is another way, the way that Jesus shared the Good News with others. Jesus never bullied or intimidated or begged people to believe. He just came alongside them in their suffering and said, “I have some good news. God loves you, and wants to make you well. Yes, even you.”

The church could do that. We at St. Paul’s could do that. This world is such a broken place. Even in our community of Madrid, there are so many broken people, so many hurting and lost people. Addictions, depression, hopelessness, fears, loneliness, loss: we all know that that is out there, and not so very far away. We probably all know people for whom these things are an every-day reality.

So what if we started telling our friends and our neighbors: “Our God loves you and wants to make you well. Yes, even you.” We could seek out the suffering and the outcast, the least and the lost, and tell them, “Our God and our Gospel is for you. Yes, even you.” The church could say, again and again, to every single person, “You are welcome here, too. Yes, even you.”

And I know we can do this. I know it. Over the years, many of you have commented on what I say pretty much every time we gather together, “No matter who you are, and no matter where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” I started saying this – almost nine years ago now – because *this is the kind of welcome you gave me*. But I know I’m not the only one who has experienced the great welcome and hospitality of St. Paul’s Church. I believe that in your core, this is who you are. So we are primed – I believe it is in our very DNA! – to do this welcoming work, to bring the Good News to all of creation, to live out the Epiphany of our Lord.

On this Epiphany Sunday, we celebrate the unveiling of God's salvation to the whole wide world, the revelation of Christ's light to everything that exists. This morning the light shines in our darkness and holds forth the promise of healing for a world that is badly broken. But there is a catch: if the world will ever see that light, they will have to see it in us first.

And we can start at this table. ...This table that is not just for us.

There is a whole big, broken world out there that God intends to heal and make new. There is a scattered human race that God means to gather together around the great banquet table. This table is for them. This table is for the whole world.

So when we leave this morning, when we go back to our homes and our workplaces and our schools and our communities, my prayer is that the Spirit would send us to others, giving us strength to seek them out and to say to them, "This table, this Gospel, this Christ, is not just for me. All this is for you. Yes, even you."

Thanks be to God.