

Epiphany Sunday – Year C  
January 10, 2009  
Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY  
Ephesians 3:2-12  
Pastor Paul Horn

- Do you want to know the secret to salvation?  
I. It's not something you can figure out on your own  
II. It has to be revealed

*<sup>2</sup> Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, <sup>3</sup> that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. <sup>4</sup> In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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.*

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

In the Beetle Bailey cartoon this week the character Zero is sitting on his bunk in the barracks pondering, "Why is this a toothbrush and not a teethbrush, why is it a pair of pants and a pair of scissors and..." his buddy on the bunk next to him butts in, "Let it go, Zero. If you ponder the mysteries of the universe too deeply, you'll go nuts." I think it's human nature that we ask, "Why?" It's why the simple answer "Because" doesn't satisfy a 3-year-old's curiosity. It's why NASA builds telescopes, shoots rockets and satellites into space and lands a robotic rover on Mars.

God has purpose in the way he designed and created the world and the human body - so that we would ask questions, "Where did we come from? What is the purpose of life?" When we marvel at the great vast universe we have to admit that some great being designed and made all this, it certainly was not an accident or chance. The apostle Paul points out in Acts 17 that we might seek him out and find out who he is. But if that's all the further we go, simply acknowledging him as a supreme being, it's not enough. For we cannot know this supreme being's name and more importantly what he has done to save us from death and a guilty conscience.

And it's not as if God is being surreptitious on purpose. Like a black ops unit who is told to gear up, hop on this helicopter and you'll be told what your mission is when

you arrive. God isn't being secretive. On our own we cannot know God's name, specifically that he is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that Father planned my soul's salvation from the beginning of time, and in the course of history sent his Son to be born as a human being, carry the load of my sins, I could not have known that he obeyed all 10 commandments flawlessly, received my punishment, died in my place, rose again to put his stamp of approval on his work. This is all a mystery to us. By nature we were born with a sinful condition which did not allow me or you or anyone to figure it out on our own. The only thing we can figure out is that this supreme being will judge us because our conscience bothers us when we do wrong or fail to do good. The only thing we figured out is that if we do enough good maybe this God will show some compassion on our souls, maybe if we're better than others, maybe if we try our hardest, then this God will take all this into consideration. But reality is, when we lay our heads on our death bed, we will tremble and ponder the same questions, "Have I done enough, was I good enough, have I tried hard enough? This is the mystery millions of folks on this planet will struggle with today. The mystery of salvation through Jesus Christ must be disclosed because your sinful nature will not allow you or me or anyone to figure it out on our own...

It was not a mystery for the Jewish people of Israel. Part of God's infinite wisdom was to reveal his plan to save the world to the Jewish race. In vs10 of our lesson Paul talks about the "manifold wisdom of God," the fact that God's wisdom is complex, it has many layers, like the layers of an onion, you peel a layer away and see more layers. God revealed his plan in the same way.

In his wisdom God first revealed his plan in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve chose to plunge the whole world into sin and death. It was a very simple plan, simple promise... an offspring of the woman would crush serpent's head. Someone would be born from a woman and undo the destruction Satan had caused to the human race. Peel back another layer of the onion, and God gets more specific. He reveals to Abraham (Gen 15) that through his offspring, all the nations of the earth would be blessed. His nationality, the Hebrews, would carry the seed of the Savior. Another layer of the onion is peeled away when he reveals that the Savior would be born from Jacob's fourth oldest son, Judah. Peel another layer of the onion away... through Moses God reveals his holy law, ceremonies and sacrifices which pointed the people of Israel to the Lamb who would take away their sins by a sacrifice. Peel another layer of the onion away, he announces to King David, from the tribe of Judah that his family would carry the lineage of the Savior. David himself peels away more layers of the plan by prophesying that the Savior would suffer, die and rise again. The prophets after David revealed more layers of the onion by stating who this Savior would be; born of a virgin, they would call him Immanuel, which means *God with us*; he would be born in Bethlehem of Judea. The prophets even told the Israelites what signs would accompany his epiphany; the Spirit of the Lord would rest on him, the dead would be raised, the blind see, the mute speak, the deaf hear, the kingdom of God would be proclaimed.

And when all the layers of the onion were peeled away, there stood Jesus. The sad reality is that not many believed, even though they saw the signs and heard Jesus' message. It was by God's grace that a few faithful believed. Even this faithful remnant would not have believed unless the LORD had revealed the Savior to them.

After Jesus had finished his work of salvation, by living a life absent of sin, offering the sacrifice of himself once for all sins for all people, rising from dead demonstrating his power over death, ascending into heaven, he tells his apostles, "Go to all nations, not just the Jews, and make disciples by baptizing and by teaching them." Another peel of the onion pulled away...

The Apostles would not have known this unless it was revealed to them. Sure, it was prophesied beforehand in the Old Testament that Christ would be "a light to enlighten the Gentiles." The apostles knew that prophecy, but did not know it now applied to them unless God revealed it to them. Paul explains in Vs5,9 – **this mystery was not made known to men in other generations.** But now, part of God's plan was to reveal this information to Gentiles.

It was hard for the apostles to understand this. This was a radical idea in the mind of a Jew in that day. The Jews knew they were God's chosen people. They were told not to associate with Gentiles. They even considered them unclean because they were heathens. We see this in the story of Peter and Cornelius. Do you remember that story from Acts? Peter had a vision of a giant sheet being let down from heaven. The sheet contained all sorts of animals. God told Peter, "Get up and eat!" To which Peter replied, "Surely not Lord!" According to Old Testament rules, all those animals on that sheet were unclean. Just thinking about eating them was despicable to a Jew. Shortly after his dream ended, two men were at Peter's door knocking, "Our master wants you to come and talk to him about Jesus!" When Peter and his companions entered the room, there stood a Roman centurion and his family and friends. A room full of Gentiles! But as Peter shared the good news of Jesus with them, he was astonished when the gospel took hold of their hearts and they believed! The apostles then examined the Old Testament Scriptures and duh! Salvation is for the Gentiles, too! God was telling Peter, "Go also to the Gentiles."

So why did I go into all this detail about the history of the Jews and peeling away the layers of the onion and the history of God's plan? Because this story is about you and me! We are not descended from the Jews. By our DNA we are not part of the chosen nation, part of the "family." But what is really important to understand is that by nature, our sinful nature makes us ineligible to be part of the family of God. This mystery was not revealed to our ancestors. By nature we were outside of the family, spiritually blind, deaf, ignorant, not knowing any other way except to do good, try to do better and be better than others... which is no way at all but the path

to hell. But God, in his manifold wisdom, revealed his plan of salvation to you and me.

It is a mystery... that God would send his only Son to be punished for a world full of ignorant, self-righteous sinners to make us members of his household and heirs of eternal life. A mystery that can only be explained by one word: grace.

Paul says, vs6 **“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.”** It was a mystery because previously without Christ, you did not know God’s plan of salvation. The mystery was revealed to you **through the gospel**; the good news of Jesus found in God’s Word and Sacraments, first of all that you are **heirs together with Israel, members together of one body...** imagine if you had rich relative who had died and had left you in their will as the sole successor of their entire estate worth \$4million and no one came and told you? How devastating! How much more devastating if no one told you about the eternal inheritance of heaven, of forgiveness of your sins, a priceless treasure indeed, which is yours through membership in God’s family? It is by God’s grace that you had faithful parents who brought you to the baptismal font, to be sprinkled with water and the Word to wash away your sins, making you a child of God and an heir of eternal life in heaven. Paul describes our membership in God’s family in chapter 2 of Ephesians, **“You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.”** (2:19) It is by the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, that this mystery has been made known to you.

Finally, Paul says in vs6 that we are **sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus**. Sharers or partners... It’s nice to have a partner, isn’t it, especially when you’re playing a card game, you and your partner work together to win. It’s nice to have a partner in marriage... to lean on each other through the difficult times and to share in the joy of the good times. It’s nice to have a partner when you’re overcoming an addiction, someone to be your strength and confidant. How much more so the blessing we have that you and I, my dear brothers and sisters, share with each other the promise in Christ Jesus! What a blessing to share in this fellowship with other believers that we have a sure and certain promise from Christ through his Word and Sacraments... that we are **heirs together, members together, sharers together... in Christ, in baptism, in Holy Communion, in forgiveness of sins, in eternal life.**

Wouldn’t be a greater blessing if everyone you knew and loved was together with you and me in Christ Jesus? I suspect there are Gentiles out there, as well as some Jews, whom you know and I know, who do not know this mystery, who are still seeking the truth about God, who say that they pray to God, believe in God, but do they know who he is? Do they know him as Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Do they know about the plan the Father made that he loved a world full of sinners, and did not want them to perish, so he sent his Son Jesus as their substitute? Do they know

those truths? More importantly, do they believe it? Do they depend on those truths for their soul's salvation?

This is why God has called each and everyone of us, young and old, to share this mystery with them so that they can share with us in Christ. It is by God's grace that he would send us, work through us, as we administer the Word and Sacrament to these people, and that he would use these tools to turn souls to him, another mystery...

I think that we all are a little like Zero from that Beetle Bailey cartoon. We marvel at the mysteries of the universe with simple faith and ask, "Why, how, and for what purpose?" The good news, my dear friends, is that you never have to wonder about your salvation. You never have to wonder where you will spend eternity, or about your sins, or about whether you were good enough. In God's infinite wisdom, he revealed to us that Jesus was good enough for us, that his death was enough to cover over all of our sins, that his resurrection guarantees our rescue from the grave. We never have to wonder about heaven, and that's why we continue to marvel at the mystery of the grace of God. Amen.