

## The First Sunday of Epiphany at St. Mark's Lutheran Church

Ephesians 3:2-13 . . . Preached on January 11, 2004

<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. <sup>13</sup>I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

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Brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus our Lord,

Welcome to the debriefing. "Debriefing" is a term that we would probably associate with those who work undercover and have special knowledge and information about a crime or national security. A debriefing involves the asking of questions and the gaining of more information. It is nothing brief by any means but consists of details and new details that have been discovered. Yet only a select group of individuals are made aware of such newly found knowledge. Any individual who is privy to such otherwise secret information must be a person who is reliable, a person who carries a tremendous amount of trust. That person is very important.

Our God comes to us today to assure us that we are so privileged. We are so honored to have certain information that before hand was not readily and fully available to all people. It is worth noting that, as you read through the Old Testament, the prophets are all from the family of Israel. It doesn't mean that only the family of Israel knew about this message, but that God only sent prophets through Israel. They were his conduit, his channel, and his way of communicating to the Children of Israel his promise of a Savior. And now, in these days, all boundaries are knocked down so that everyone in the world might know the mystery of God. This secret is not a secret that we are to keep in confidence. This mystery is not something we're supposed to harbor or to contain. And it is certainly not one we are to keep to ourselves. But it is one we are to proclaim. Today, God's Word tells us to realize that **God's grace is not to be a concealed secret!**

1. **God's wisdom is known.** The Law and the Gospel has been published and proclaimed **so that each of us here is without excuse.** We can't say we didn't know any better.
2. And secondly we come to realize that **his grace is known so that we too may have confidence.**

Consider the high privilege it is that God has given us this gift. We are given this gift not so that it can be shielded, but so that it will be shared. He points out to us in the words of our text that even Paul had to be made aware of this fact. Paul grew up in a Jewish family and grew up to be a Pharisee. He needed to be reminded by

God himself that he was not to share that message exclusively with the Jews. He was led to realize that it was intended for all, while first for the Jews. He wrote this truth to the Romans, chapter 1:16, *"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile."* In his calling, this stated fact is brought to our attention in Acts chapter 9. We are reminded that God specifically tells the prophet Ananais who was to baptize Saul on the way to Damascus, *"This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name"* (Acts 9:15, 16).

God's message wasn't only intended for the Old Testament believers. But because they were the ministers of the Word and because they were quite prone to look out for themselves, the message did not always get out as it should.

- In fact the Lord sometimes had to force certain individuals to get the Word out. Consider Jonah. At one time in his ministry, Jonah was told not to go and preach to the Jews. But as a Jew himself, he was to go to the enemy nation, the Assyrians, and even to their capital city of Nineveh to proclaim the message of salvation. Therefore, we know that there were non-Jews that came to the knowledge of the Savior.
- The Old Testament also records the example of Naaman. He was the commander of an enemy nation. And through the simple testimony of an Israelite slave girl, he was brought to the knowledge of the Savior.
- We also know that in Egypt, when the children of Israel lived in the land of Goshen, the Lord made himself known even to those who were non-Jews, the Egyptians. They were without excuse indeed because they saw the miraculous signs in the ten plagues.

We also know that in the time of Jesus' earthly ministry there were individuals who came to know the one true God. There was the Centurion, a Roman who was stationed there in the territory of Palestine. God used his occupation and deployment in Palestine as an opportunity for him to know the true God. And he grew in such confidence of the True God that when Jesus approached him in order to grant his request of healing a servant, the Centurion said, "Lord, I do not deserve to have come under my roof. But just say the word and my servant will be healed" (Matthew 8:8). Jesus said "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith" (Matthew 8:10).

Certainly we have other examples of those that were non-Jews and came in touch with the word of God. There was the Ethiopian Eunuch as shared with us in Acts chapter 8. In short time, he was baptized by Phillip the evangelist.

The Gospel was not originally intended only for the Jews. They were to be a beacon that would even attract the non-Jews. It is by no mistake that God chose the land of Canaan, from all of the lands on the earth, to be the land that his chosen people would occupy. This territory ended up being the crossroad of all civilization. Those from Greece, those from the European area, those from the Far East, and those from Egypt invariably had to travel through Canaan. We again see God's work. We see God's word in action. We are also told in Isaiah chapter 49 that God always had intended that all people know this true Savior. In Isaiah 49:6, we hear the Lord's statement:

"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant  
to restore the tribes of Jacob  
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.

I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,  
that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

Clearly the Messiah, our Savior, would not be so restricted as to only save one nation of people. He would come to save all nations of people. Such a truth and fact comes with accountability and responsibility for each of us here today. We are answerable to God. We are without excuse. We have no reason to keep the saving message to ourselves. But we have every reason to share it with others. There is no reason to think that we are some how more worthy of God's grace than anyone else. Rather, we are privileged,

- To take that truth
- To share that truth
- To grow in that truth.

What Paul shares with us is rather humbling. It humbles us to think that God would so love us. This is true, even when . . .

- We did nothing to earn that love
- We did nothing to receive that love
- We did nothing to demand or require that love.

In fact we've done everything,

- To spurn God's love
- To stiff arm him
- And to reject him. All this is because of our sinful condition.

Predominately, our condition has consisted of serving self and not to serve Christ. We prefer to ponder what makes me happy, and what serves me, not what Christ daily and freely gives me by his grace. We like to think that maybe we are not so bad after all. By nature we want to focus on ourselves. We don't want to focus on Christ. We recoil at grasping what only God could provide. This includes the deliverance and rescue he grants us, from sin, death and hell. In fact, as we explore God's Word, we come to realize that he gives us all that we truly need. Our text further tells us that he gives us additional blessings. Indeed, these are in addition to forgiveness, life and salvation. So our text goes on to say, "*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*" (Ephesians 3:8).

In studying the original text, there is a clear message. In other words, there is not enough time in our lifetime to enumerate and to fully exhaust the blessings God has given to us. In fact, a word picture exists regarding "the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Ephesians 3:8). Consider a ski slope of some sort where the children like to sled and so you see lots of foot prints in the snow, all the children are walking, to pull their sleds back up the hill. Imagine trying to keep track of one set of footprints in all of that snow. One set of footprints, from one child, would easily get lost among all the other. It would be truly difficult to follow that one set. It would be nigh unto impossible. That is precisely the picture our text gives to us. To try to follow one set of footprints among all the others would be unsearchable. It would be impossible to fully grasp and to find and to trace out. God has given us such rich blessings by his Son leaving the glories of heaven and coming to this earth. He already lived our life and died our death, and then he rose again and ascended into heaven, to assure us that he's gone to prepare a place for us there. And until he comes back on the Last Day, he continues to open the flood gates that allow the outpouring of love and mercies into our lives.

As a result of Christ's finished work, God assures us that all things are under the realm of his control. Not one thing, not even a sparrow falling from a tree or a hair falling from a head happens without our Savior knowing it. He is in full dominant control over our lives and always for our good. He is blessing us here to assure us that with this knowledge we are without excuse. This same fact was proclaimed by the Old Testament prophets to their hearers. On Judgment Day they would have no reason to say,

+ "Well, God you didn't tell me that you were so good."

+ "You never told me about this salvation."

+ "You never told me about my sin."

+ "You never told me what I should do or not do."

But indeed, he did! They couldn't say such things. For that is why God sent those prophets of long ago.

Today, our God comes to us to give us this same word so that we are not only without excuse but now we have the assurance of his grace and the forgiveness. We have the means to do something about it. We can set our lives on track. We can put into practice his moral will. And we can share his grace with others. As we come to grasp his grace and to realize that we are no more worthy than anyone else we can't help but to share that grace. We will want to people in any and every situation with full confidence. This is how our text concludes, *"In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory"* (Ephesians 3:12, 13).

All barriers and inhibitions, any concerns about what other might think, are removed. We come before God knowing,

- Our full burden of sin is removed
- The shackles are taken off us
- We are free to go forward
- Free to tell others about Christ with confidence.

In fact Jesus tells us to not to take it as a personal offense when someone rejects our testimony of faith. Don't take it personally when they question how Jesus can be the only way to heaven. For Jesus says, "He who rejects you rejects me; but he who rejects me rejects him who sent me" (Luke 10:16). We are bearers of a good message, of a secret that we are privileged to share. This is not a secret we must harbor, not a secret we must conceal, but a secret we are privileged to share. Imagine being the relative of a married couple expecting a child. When the child arrives, you are one of the first people to be contacted. And suppose they tell you, "Please share this news with others". We would hardly consider that to be burden. We would rather consider that to be a privilege and a joy. Now in our lifetime God affords us the greater joy of telling others of the birth of our Savior, and indeed the joy of knowing that they too can enjoy eternity with us in heaven. God's grace is not to be a secret. God's wisdom is known so that we are without excuse. God's grace is known so that we have confidence. This means that we truly do possess confidence in approaching God and confidence in sharing the one true God for all eternity with all people. Amen