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## The Epiphany Announcement

(Ephesians 3:1-12 NRSV) This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles-- 2 for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, 3 and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, 4 a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. 5 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: 6 that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. 7 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. 8 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, 9 and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; 10 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. 11 This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12 in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

To many Protestants, the church season of Epiphany is probably the least known and least familiar of all the church holy days and seasons. We celebrate the birth of Christ at Christmas, we celebrate the victoriousness of God's love through Christ at Easter, we celebrate the birthday of the church at Pentecost. But Epiphany – what is that? Well, Epiphany begins on what is called Twelfth Night, January 6, twelve days after Christmas, the day on which the Wise Men were traditionally supposed to have arrived in Bethlehem to see the Christ child. And, you may be surprised to know, the celebration of Epiphany in the life of the church pre-dates the celebration of Christmas by several centuries. In fact, to this day many Christians in other parts of the world celebrate Epiphany, Twelfth Night, much more like we celebrate Christmas – in remembrance of the gifts of the wise men, this is the day that gifts are exchanged and presents are given. But what I want to concentrate on this morning is one characteristic of Epiphany that I think is key to what we do and remember and are called to think about during this season between Christmas and Lent:

and that is the fact that, when all is said and done, Epiphany has the characteristic of an **announcement**.

When you think about an announcement is usually some sort of **interruption**. They may even startle us. How many of you remember, forty years ago, hearing that oh-so-distinctive tone come over the radio, that low-pitched beeeeeep and your routine was indeed interrupted and your stomach leaped just a little until you finally heard the announcer say *“This has been only a **test** of the Emergency Broadcast....”* Or to take a much more welcome interruption, I can still remember the glee with which my fellow seventh-graders and I would greet an unexpected announcement from the teacher that *“Today we will be seeing a movie instead of having our quiz.”* Moreover, a genuine announcement adds **genuine information** to our lives. Now, I’m not talking about those late night infomercials on television that invariably begin by telling you that they have an important announcement that will make you smell better or itch less. No, a **genuine** announcement interrupts our lives with **genuine** information. And so it is that Epiphany in the life of the church functions as this sort of announcement. The word “epiphany” literally means “to be seen” or “to be revealed.” And indeed during the season of Epiphany the church celebrates what is announced, what is revealed in Jesus Christ, what is made known, new information, a new revelation.

Let me put all of this much more simply: Epiphany – as symbolized in the story of the wise men and in our scripture from Paul this morning – celebrates **who** Christ is, not just *the mere fact* He has come. Epiphany announces not only the coming of the Savior, but what **kind** of savior He is. And so when you think about it this way, just as the meaning of Easter is completed in the Holy Spirit’s announcement in commissioning the church on the day of Pentecost, so too is the meaning of Christmas completed in the announcement that comes with Epiphany. For without that Epiphany announcement, Christmas can remain incomplete and open to misinterpretation: “For unto you a child is born, a savior is

given” – but what **kind** of savior? “For God so loved the world that He gave his only son” – but what **kind** of God? “And the shepherds departed in haste and found Mary, Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger, and they fell down and worshiped” – but why? What were they worshipping? Who is this God and who is this Jesus? Without the Epiphany announcement, the revelation is not **complete**.

So what, then, **does** Epiphany announce and reveal to us that indeed completes what was given at Christmas? Well, I believe that there are two ways that Epiphany does this. First, the visit of the Wise Men to Jesus on Epiphany, Twelfth Night, is meant to convey something very, very crucial: God’s love is not just for one people, one group, but is for everyone. Christ is the savior of all; God is the loving parent of everyone. That’s the point of the Wise Men being “from the east”; they were, in the scripture’s terms, “gentiles” and the word “gentile” means pretty much everybody who was not a Jew. In fact, church tradition early on said that one of the Wise Men was an African, one of them was an astrologer from what we now call Iran, and one of them was from India. And that diversity is exactly the point: for the Savior of the world is indeed the Savior of **all** peoples and **all** races and **all** tongues.

Now that may seem obvious to us, but may recall that one of the earliest “church fights,” if you will, was over whether or not those who were not Jews first had to become Jews before they could become Christians. That is, did “Gentile” converts to Christianity have to keep the dietary laws and did males have to be circumcised? This issue was utterly crucial in the first two generations after Christ, and Paul argued strongly that, no, Christ has come to show God’s love for all and that Gentiles – whatever their ethnicity or religious background – could become Christians without first becoming Jews. And while that particular issue may not be a “live” one for us, where it **does** in fact connect with us and where the Epiphany announcement **does** interrupt our routines is in the fact that Paul

is really reminding us that there are to be NO barriers of class, or style, or practice, or ethnicity in the church of God. The Epiphany announcement is there precisely to remind us that God wants no barriers to people who seek to come to Him through Christ. God is reminding us that the most important thing – more important, for example, than “the way we have always done it” – is that we make it clear that we want those people who come through our doors seeking hope, seeking meaning, seeking something deeper that they don’t even know how to name, to know what we know, to experience the grace that we have experienced, to know the sense of extended family that accepts every member of that family that we have been blessed with. But let me warn you: just like those Gentiles changed the early church, we too will continue to be changed as we continue to be successful in this sort of evangelism that God is calling us to. But that’s okay. That’s in fact a very good thing. For just as those Wise Men brought their gifts to Jesus, so too will those folks who continue to find God through us also bring their own gifts, their own styles. And that is something that I hope you join me in looking forward to, not just that our congregation will continue to just survive but that we will be the vehicle for lives that are transformed through God’s grace and they will be the vehicle for transforming us!

Now, if the first point of the Epiphany announcement is that God’s love through Jesus Christ is for absolutely everyone, there is also a second thing about that announcement that I think is absolutely crucial for us to know, remember, and learn from, and it very much follows from this first point. God through Christ is revealed, announced at Epiphany as indeed the God of everyone. But there’s another way to put that and it is what Paul is getting at and it is what the scripture Gay preached on last week is also getting at: through Christ, you and I has been made into what one theologian has called “honorary Jews.” Now, that sounds startling to our ears, but listen again to how Paul put it in his letter to the Ephesian church: *“the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same*

*body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*" Paul is being very, very precise in his language here: Gentiles – even though they are not required to become Jews through dietary or ritual law – do now in fact become a part of the same body as the Jews, those people whom God chose to convey His teachings and his grace; they too are now heirs to the very same kind of relationship that the Jews have had with God. The Jewish people have shared and ***continue to share*** in God's promise through the Law and the prophets, and we Christians now share in that same promise through Christ Jesus. In the book of Romans – his final and most developed theological expression – Paul puts the point this way: *"I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people...."* (Romans 11:1-2a NRSV). Paul also points out a few chapters later that Christians have been in fact "grafted on" to the Jewish people and their relationship to God (Romans 11:17).

Now, why am I spending time on this? Well, I think it's crucial. There is a very sad and dark side to the history of the church in the way that it has too often treated the Jewish people. As the great 19<sup>th</sup> century English Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli – himself a Jew – sadly put the point, *"The Jews are a nervous people. Nineteen centuries of Christian love have taken its toll."*<sup>1</sup> Now there are, of course, other sorts of stories about the relationship between Christians and their Jewish kin – stories of heroism in the face of Nazi persecution, stories of Christians standing up against Jewish persecution – but there is also too much in the church's history that condoned – or at least silently stood by – truly awful treatment of those whom the church *should* have had the most respect for. Anti-Judaism is alive and well in our culture and even in the Church. And you and I can get pulled into it, sometimes without even thinking, when we laugh at certain jokes or buy into certain stereotypes. And that grieves God.

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.religioustolerance.org/jud\\_pers.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/jud_pers.htm)

Because the point of the Epiphany announcement is this: Christ – thanks be to God – came to reveal His gracious unconditional love to those – you and me and “the gentiles” – who did not know that love. Can Jews become Christians? Of course. Are they required to somehow? No. Christ came for the gentiles but he did not come to *replace* the Jews or supersede them. Christ came – Epiphany tells us – so that you and I and all the non-Jewish world might indeed become “joint heirs” to the promise of God which He had made known through the law and the prophets and to those he had chosen and loved.

When all is said and done, the Epiphany announcement then presents us with a choice: How shall **we** complete the message of Christmas? What kind of savior shall **we** follow? What kind of God shall **we** worship? The startling, wonderful interrupting and even surprising good news that Paul is announcing is that in Christ God loves even us, just as he loved and loves those whom he chose so long ago in the land of Ur and on the peak of Mt. Sinai. That means that there is no room whatsoever in the Christian life for prejudice or hate or bigotry towards anyone. Because God rejects nothing and no one He has made. God may grieve over some of the things that His children manage to do to each other, but God does not reject anyone; God is always seeking to welcome and care for and be a grace in the lives of everyone.

To spread that news, to live out that news -- may that indeed be **our** calling and **our** mission as well in this new year!