

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
First Sunday after Epiphany, January 11, 2015

✠ ✠ ✠

(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 496, 134:5, 373:1-4, 373:5-7, 644.

Lessons: Isaiah 60:1-6, Ephesians 2:8-22, Matthew 2:1-12.

Sermon Text: Ephesians 3:1-12.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

I think most of you are familiar with a situation when a movie or a story or a novel doesn't reveal special information until the very end. This may be an unusual twist, a surprise conclusion, or an unusual connection between characters. Whatever the situation that you have read about or seen, there is some kind of a "mystery" in the story which is not revealed until late in the story. That is the way in which we are using the word "mystery" in our sermon. We are not using it in the sense of something that is unknown to you or unknowable.

Today you heard about "*the mystery made known to [Paul] by revelation*".

To you, the child of God, this mystery is not something unknown. But it is something that is unknown to the majority of people in the world. They just do not know

THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST

- 1. It was never revealed to mankind in complete detail until he was on earth.**
- 2. What is "the mystery"? Gentiles, too, share in God's salvation in Christ Jesus.**

Why do a majority of people in the world not know about this mystery of Christ?

It is because "*faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.*" (Romans 10:17) Many of the seven billion people in the world have never heard truth from the Word of God. It is a truth, or really a set of truths, that many of you have known since you were children, as Paul writes to Timothy: "*from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.*" (2 Timothy 3:15)

In addition to those millions and perhaps billions of people in the world who have never heard the Word of God, we have many in a much sadder situation. Many who have heard the Word of God have rejected it.

Paul is writing "*To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus:*" (Ephesians 1:1) And now he is saying "*Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation.*"

Then he goes on to explain precisely what he is talking about so that "*In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 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.*"

When Jesus Christ came to earth, a marvelous revelation was made to mankind. The angels were singing this message: "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.*" "*For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.*" (Luke 2:14 and 11) That Savior lived and died among mankind so "*that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*" (John 3:16)

Jesus Christ was sent first to the Jews, the physical descendants of Abraham. And many Jews, even up through the time that Jesus was on earth, didn't feel or believe that anyone except Jews should receive God's salvation. Even after Christ accomplished his work, many Jews also felt that in order to receive God's salvation, one had to follow every rule in the Old Testament plus the rules that the teachers of the Jews had made up.

Are we who believe in Jesus Christ as our Savior today that selfish?

At least three times in the New Testament, Paul makes the point that he is very Jewish, a Jew of the sect of the Pharisees, and that his parents had brought him up as a strict Jew. He said ***"I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee"*** (Acts 23:6) and ***"that according to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee."*** (Acts 26:5) He had been brought up as a proper Jew, ***"circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee."*** (Philippians 3:5)

So, if anyone could claim to have the right blood in his veins, the right genetics, and the right Jewish upbringing, it should be Paul.

Paul goes on to remind his Gentile readers that God's special gift of grace to him was his calling as an apostle among the Gentiles. He was sent by Jesus himself to proclaim the Gospel unto Gentiles. Paul himself had told the Ephesian Christians of this fact. They had also seen firsthand how he had administered his calling in their midst, and they had also heard how he was performing the work of his calling in other pagan countries.

He talks ***"about the administration of God's grace."*** God had informed him directly of his calling as apostle to the Gentiles, in this way revealing to him what his work on earth was to be. He had emphasized to the Galatian Christians ***"I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ."*** (Galatians 1:11-12)

So what about this "mystery"? Paul elaborates on this mystery and explains exactly what it is: ***"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."***

Is this such a mystery to us? Surely not. How often haven't you heard that God so loved the world? How often haven't you heard that Christ died for all men? How often have you heard the command to go into all the world to preach the gospel? How often have you heard how it applies to you personally?

Paul tells us that God had revealed this mystery to him.

Of this mystery or message Paul writes: Has this message, this mystery, ever been revealed to men as clearly and plainly as now, as it is fully revealed to his holy apostles and prophets through the Holy Spirit? He echoes what Peter wrote: ***"For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost."*** (2 Peter 1:21)

The mystery relating to Christ as the Savior of all mankind was revealed to the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament in prophecy and in symbols. But in the times of the Old Testament the message was not generally known, nor was it so clear and unmistakable as it is now that Jesus Christ has come. Jesus Christ has now come to earth. He lived, suffered, died and came back to life. To his holy apostles, who were incidentally also prophets foretelling the future, God revealed the glorious facts concerning salvation in Christ through his Holy Spirit. By the teaching of the Spirit these men gained a full understanding of the relation between prophecy and fulfillment, of the ministry of Christ, of the significance of Christ's death and resurrection, and many other facts connected with the life and work of the Redeemer.

The content of the mystery as it specifically concerned the Gentiles, was that the Gentiles are fellow-heirs and fellow-members and fellow-partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel. The apostle piles up the terms in order to emphasize as strongly as possible the full equality of the Gentile Christians with those of Jewish descent.

The Gentiles are heirs with the members of believing Israel, inheriting all the blessings held out to the children. They belong to the same body as the Jewish Christians, that is, to the body of Christ, the Holy Christian Church. The same promise of eternal salvation in Christ Jesus is extended to them through the preaching of the Gospel. Believing Gentiles, heirs together with the believing Jews in all things belong equally with them to the same Holy Christian Church and share equally with them in the Messianic promise.

Paul certainly doesn't praise himself in any of this.

He says 'I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me according to the operation of His power.' He became a minister of the Gospel, a servant, not because of any personal merit, but by reason of the free gift of God's grace. He considered his office a gift of which he was not worthy. And it was

not his own wisdom, personal charisma, or any other talent that was effective in his work, but the power of God. God's gracious power works in those who preach the Gospel as well as in those who hear and believe it.

Paul tells us that he became a servant of the gospel because of the gift of God's grace given to him through the working of God's power. ***"I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power."*** He was not one who decided to serve Christ on his own. He had been a hater of Christ. He persecuted the followers of Christ. It was only by the direct intervention of Jesus Christ that Paul came to believe in Jesus Christ as his Savior.

But God gave him a special grace, a special gift of his love, and with it an assignment ***"to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things."***

It is now that ***"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 which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord."***

It is through the church that this message should be made known to the world.

And who is the church? You are part of the church. You are part of ***"the faithful in Christ Jesus."*** (Ephesians 1:1) You are one who has received this inestimable gift. You know what that really means? It is a gift more precious than gold and silver. Why do I say that? Because it was "not with gold or silver" that Jesus Christ redeemed you, "but with his holy precious blood and with his innocent sufferings and death".

And now you have a calling, a job, a mission. Your mission is spelled out by Jesus in Matthew 28 and Mark 16. ***"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."*** (Matthew 28:19-20) ***"Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation."*** (Mark 16:15)

That is what you, each of you, all of us are to do, because this is all ***"according to [God's] eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord."***

Because of what God has done for you and told you about through his Word, you have confidence during your life on earth, and you may now approach God with confidence knowing he forgives sin.

In fact it is in Christ ***"and through faith in him [that] we may approach God with freedom and confidence."***

So what are you to do with this assurance that you are not excluded from the kingdom of God simply because you are not Jewish? You owe it to God, and to your fellow man, to tell others and to invite them to come and hear the truth of God's word which we firmly believe and confess and which is presented to you every Sunday here in this church. Do not be selfish with that most important, that eternal, that essential message. Help to give it away, to all mankind, that most important truth. Jesus died for sin, your sin and all the sin of all mankind. Amen.