

*Epiphany Eyes*  
Celebration of the Epiphany of our Lord  
January 7, 2018  
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Text: Ephesians 3

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION:

Lord God of the nations,  
We have seen the star of your glory  
Rising in splendor.  
So may the light of your word  
Pierce the night of this earth  
With the dawn of your justice and peace.  
Through Jesus Christ,  
The light of the world. Amen

I'm not sure who to give credit to for what I'm going to tell you – tell you a profound thing that a person said to me. It was someone at Hope Church, I know that; and it was a few, several years ago now, I know that; and I'm pretty sure it was a woman – so if you fit those criteria, it could have been you! It was a particular, theological, conversation, which, again, I'm afraid I don't remember the circumstances of it, but it was about the communion liturgy. And what this person said was that one of the most meaningful parts of the communion liturgy to her was this: “together we proclaim the mystery of the faith”

– and what caught my attention was that that part of the liturgy had never been particularly important or meaningful to me – sorry to say – but what she said about that phrase changed that for me. Want to know what that was? – well, that's at the end of the sermon! – to get us there, I want to give the background which prepares us to hear what she had to say – and for that we need Ephesians 3, because Ephesians 3 is all about “mystery” – did you notice that? “the

mystery made known to me by revelation” – “my understanding of the mystery of Christ” – “in former generations the mystery not made known” – “the plan of the mystery hidden in God” – it is the single greatest concentration of the word mystery in a new testament chapter! - and that’s what we need to explore.

To do that, I do want to use that image of Epiphany eyes that I talked about with the children – we’ll call them Epiphany glasses (but I’m not going to put them back on – you’ll have to imagine) - and we need to realize a couple of things about what having Epiphany eyes does NOT have to do with when it comes to mystery, and then what it does. And that all has to do with what the word “mystery” is NOT about here and what it is. You may know about me that I like words, and playing around with their meanings – maybe a bit too much sometimes – but here what I want to point out is simply that the word “mystery” does have some very different meanings to it, and it’s important to clarify which meaning is at work in this Ephesians passage.

One meaning for “mystery” is that is a puzzle, a conundrum, to solve, or something obscure that remains unsolved – I think that’s probably the meaning that we are most familiar with and use most often. People are fascinated by mysteries – mystery novels and tv shows and plays; it is admirable to be able to solve mysteries, as sleuths in such settings do; people even seem to want there to be mysteries – UFOs, the loch ness monster, or, at my house, big foot!

Everyone loves a good mystery to solve, or to remain unsolved – and that’s great...but that’s not what mystery is about here. And other than simply adjusting our brains to not use that meaning when we read Ephesians 3, it’s also important to realize this about Epiphany eyes – because what it means is that faith is not some magic glasses that are going to suddenly solve everything for you – a faith in God in Jesus Christ is not the offer of a clever solution to all of life’s conundrums that suddenly makes everything clear. And that’s sometimes the kind of idea that gets attached to faith. But it’s not that kind of mystery and not that kind of faith.

Another meaning of the word mystery is more particular to the time when Ephesians is written, but still has some important things for us to hear in it. In the Greek/Roman world, ‘mysteries’ were a way of talking about secret religious knowledge and ceremonies – and in order to get access to such mysteries, you had to be admitted, but also agree to keep the mystery secret. Understandably, when Christianity came along, a lot of folks thought it was another such mystery religion – but Paul says NO, that’s not it – he uses the word “mystery” to connect to the religious culture, but Paul wants to transform and reclaim what that word means – which we’re just about to get to! But we need to notice first what this says about our Epiphany glasses – which is that those glasses are not part of a secret uniform that is your ticket into a private club, or a way of separating out who’s got the special spectacles or not – that’s not what this mystery, our faith, is about.

So that’s what “mystery” is not – but what is it, then? – well how about this: “Mystery” is the revelation of a truth we could not know on our own – it is a way of God which confounds the ways of the world – it is a gift that opens up in us a way of knowing God and ourselves and the world in a transforming way. Hear again how Paul speaks in Ephesians 3: ‘revealed that Jews and Gentiles are all part of one body’ – ‘the good news of the boundless riches, the grace, of Jesus Christ’ – ‘the rich variety of God’s wisdom made known’ – this is the mystery revealed – that in a world in which divisions, and scarcity, and power-over have become entrenched as ‘the way it is’, there breaks in the revelation of a different way: of humanity connected together in the abundant grace of God – that is the mystery, the wisdom, of God at work in the world through Jesus Christ.

And that’s what brings us back to the communion liturgy with which I began, and the mystery person who told me something profound (do you see what I did there?! ☺ ). The liturgy says: “Together we proclaim the mystery of the faith: Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again” – and whether I realized it or not I was always saying that with some sense of

resignation, that it was an admission of something inscrutable that we are still figuring out (and I know there is some truth to that!). But what this wise woman said to me is NO – what the liturgy is saying is that we PROCLAIM (announce! – good news!) the MYSTERY, which is the wisdom of God – we boldly say that there is something revealed to us, which is that: God has embraced in God’s self all that is deadly and broken; God’s power of life is the enduring power of this world; God’s fulfillment is the promise for all of creation – or in other words – ‘Christ has died; Christ is Risen; Christ will come again.’ So now whenever I say or hear the liturgy, it sounds very different to me, not resignation, but encouragement and hope: “we PROCLAIM the MYSTERY of the faith” – the good news that God claims this world for true life.

And that brings us back to Epiphany eyes, Epiphany glasses, Epiphany vision too. Because why is that this Mystery is about Epiphany? It’s because our gift, our calling, is both to see ourselves with renewed vision and to be able to look at the world around us in a transformed way. As you read this passage in Ephesians, you come to see that Paul speaks of the church, the body of Christ, us, as being the embodiment of God’s mystery in the world – the Church is a mystery! – now perhaps that sounds all too true in less flattering ways...the conundrum of the many shortcomings of the church; the ways the church makes of itself a private club. But what the Church being a mystery can mean, is the calling for those who have faith in Christ to embody God’s way of life in the world – a revelation that speaks to and confounds the ways of brokenness within us and around us.

And a part of that mystery which I am finding more and more in my faith, and something I urge you to listen to the Spirit for in your faith, is that this wisdom of God is also at work in the world beyond us – that the revelation of Christ does not give us a mystery to possess, but opens our eyes to see the Spirit of life in ways around and beyond us. Those are our Epiphany eyes – allowing us to see and reach out to and connect with life wherever it is being nurtured; looking

for ways to join with others in the wisdom of God that unites and enriches life in God's grace.  
That is the mystery we are nourished in here in the feast of life.

Together we proclaim the mystery – and Epiphany eyes are given sight – thanks be to God.  
AMEN.