

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
Epiphany, January 6, 2017

✠ ✠ ✠

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

Hymns: 127, 134:1, 129, 108:1-4, 498:1-4.

Lessons: Isaiah 60:1-6, Ephesians 2:11-22, Matthew 2:2-12.

Sermon Text: Ephesians 3:2-12.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Today is Epiphany, sometimes called the Christmas of the Gentiles. Our Gospel lesson tells us of the best-known event associated with Epiphany. The Wise men, “magi” from “the East” were Gentiles such as are prophesied about in our Old Testament lesson. The very picture of camels is associated, at least in tradition, with the wise men and their travels. They were wealthy, of course, as we see by the gifts they brought – Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh, and could easily have traveled by camel.

Today we might wonder ‘What’s the big deal about Gentiles coming to Christ?’ We Gentiles have had churches which are generally recognized as “Christian” around us all our lives. We – most of us – have even had the Word of God preached and taught for us in a church which seeks to proclaim the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth of God’s Word for all our lives.

But it has not always been the case that Gentiles were welcomed to be part of a fellowship of God’s chosen people. Today we examine

THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST

- 1. Until Christ came, many Jews thought of Gentiles as not worthy of God’s grace.**
- 2. Gentiles really are fellow heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the promises in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.**

For centuries God presented his people, the descendants of Abraham, as The Chosen Ones. Isaiah writes: *“But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend, I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, ‘You are my servant’; I have chosen you and have not rejected you.”* Isaiah 41:8-9 (NIV)

Especially in their own eyes, they were special, and seemed to forget that they were simply chosen as the nation who would bring the Messiah, the Savior to the world. They were not the only recipients of that promise, but simply the ones through whom the promise would be delivered.

In believing that they were the chosen ones, that God would make the descendants of Abraham into a great nation, they forgot the last part of this very first promise to Abraham: *“The LORD had said to Abram, ‘Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”* Genesis 12:1-3 (NIV)

Old Testament Jews by and large thought of themselves first – as ‘the most important’ – and isn’t that our human nature too? They wanted to be a great nation, and after the time of David and Solomon, they simply wanted to return their nation to the huge geographical area of that former time. There are Jews even today who want to restore such a nation of Israel. Throughout their history, especially after leaving Egypt, spending 40 years in the wilderness, and coming into the Promised Land of Canaan, they wanted to ignore what God had

commanded them and adopt the wicked ways of the nations around them. They wanted a king like all the other nations. They wanted to do things their way, not God's way.

But in so doing they would adopt the ways of the heathen, the Gentiles, despite their disdain, dislike, and even hatred of Gentiles.

In the King James Version of the Old Testament, the word "heathen" is used much more often than the word "Gentiles" for the same Hebrew word. Gentiles were all other nations than the Descendants of Abraham, the Jews, Israel, also called 'the children of Israel'. The fact that the heathen – the Gentiles – worshiped false gods led Jews to despise Gentiles. Even if a Gentile should convert to Judaism, he would be regarded as a proselyte, and not quite the same as a natural-born Jew.

They didn't always realize that the most important part of God's promises to their nation was that the Savior of all mankind was to be born as a descendant of Abraham.

This idea of being God's chosen people often became a matter of pride, vanity, and exclusivity to many Jews. They thought of themselves as so special and important that they thought that assured them of special treatment by God. They thought that it was simply because they were descendants of Abraham that they were assured of a place in heaven. When Jesus told Jews ***"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."*** John 8:31-32 (NIV) he also said ***"I know you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are ready to kill me, because you have no room for my word."*** John 8:37 (NIV) They objected and boasted ***"'Abraham is our father,' they answered. 'If you were Abraham's children,' said Jesus, 'then you would do the things Abraham did. As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. You are doing the things your own father does.' 'We are not illegitimate children,' they protested. 'The only Father we have is God himself.' Jesus said to them, 'If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.'"*** John 8:39-44 (NIV)

By Jesus' day, many Jews had forgotten the real reason God had chosen them: ***"All peoples on earth will be blessed through you."*** Genesis 12:3 (NIV) That blessing would be the Savior of all men, first for the Jews, for Jesus Christ was sent first to them, and then also for the Gentiles – all other people! The Savior from all sin was to be born from them. The Old Testament repeatedly assures us of this fact.

They were chosen to bring the message of Salvation to all mankind. But they didn't always remember or realize that. They had to be reminded repeatedly of the promises such as you heard in our Old Testament lesson. Our sermon text makes it clear that Gentiles are also heirs of all God's promises.

How many people haven't been disappointed when they didn't inherit something? They may have thought that they deserved great-grandma's special plate! They may have really coveted some of grandpa's possessions that they didn't inherit! They may have been hurt or angry that they were excluded from some inheritance. And in all these instances, hasn't there been a feeling of having deserved something and someone else didn't deserve the inheritance?

Paul writes by inspiration of God that ***"This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel."*** That should put to rest any feeling of the Jews that they deserved everything that God wanted to give mankind – such as the Messiah – more than the Gentiles. After all, Jews reasoned, we by our bloodlines, are God's chosen ones and they are the heathen – the Gentiles.

The mystery of God, which many just didn't understand, was also that Gentiles are members together of one body – the same body – as all believers. That body is the Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints. Peter wrote his first letter ***"To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood."*** 1 Peter 1:1-2 (NIV) This definitely would include Gentiles, and he then tells them ***"you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you***

out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” 1 Peter 2:9-10 (NIV)

Yes, Gentiles are surely sharers in the promise of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. That promise is assured to them by faith, just as it was to believing Jews such as Abraham. When people – Gentiles as well as Jews who will read the New Testament – search the Scriptures of the New Testament – that mystery of Christ is no longer hidden but revealed by God in the Gospels and in the rest of the New Testament books. Jesus is plainly revealed through the apostles and prophets

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. Paul writes to Christians in Rome, both Jews and Gentiles: ***“Now if we are children, then we are heirs--heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.”*** Romans 8:17 (NIV) Gentiles share in all the blessings held out to the children. They belong jointly to the same body as the Jewish Christians, to the body of Christ. The same promise of eternal salvation in Christ Jesus is extended to them through the preaching of the Gospel. These three terms describe the Gentiles, first as heirs together with the believing Jews in all things, and then as belonging equally with them to the same body of believers and sharing equally with them in the Messianic promise. The key is in the word ‘together’. The idea of coheirs with believing Jews, co-members of one and the same body, that is, the church, and co-sharers with Israel is the salvation that Christ’s merit has won for all mankind.

This equality between Jews and Gentiles elaborates on what Paul wrote in chapter 2. ***“For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.”*** Ephesians 2:14-16 (NIV) This idea that Gentiles are to be and can be saved through Christ’s merits, through the Messiah’s merits and word, is not just a New Testament idea. The light to lighten the Gentiles will come from the Jews.

The mystery is not something vague or hard to understand but something that needs to be explained. After it’s been explained, it’s perfectly clear, but no human would ever have stumbled onto it without some outside help. Paul says he had received that help from God by revelation. He wrote about ***“the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. 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.”*** Ephesians 3:3-5 (NIV)

It has now been fulfilled. Paul has become a servant of this Gospel. He was at one time a vicious persecutor of Christians. On the road to Damascus to conduct a raid on Christians in that city, the risen Christ confronted Paul on the road. He literally knocked him to the ground and rebuked him: ***“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”*** Acts 9:4 (NIV) Because God worked faith in him, Paul became a convert to Christianity.

So what is the mystery of the Christ? Jews didn’t understand this so it was a “mystery” to them. Unbelievers today don’t understand or believe this so it is a “mystery” to them.

The “mystery” is that Jesus Christ is the Savior from all their sins for everyone who believes, Gentiles as well as Jews.

We pray: Lord, make us all heirs, members of Christ and sharers of his Salvation! Assure us, too, of the forgiveness of all our sins through what Jesus Christ, the Messiah of the Jews did for us, too! Amen.