**St. Paul’s Lutheran Church
Wildwood, Missouri**

**The Epiphany of our Lord
(Observed)
January 5, 2020
Ephesians 3: 1-12**

If you noticed in the bulletin, the heading for today’s service says, *“The Epiphany of our Lord – Observed.”* The reason for that is because technically, Epiphany is tomorrow, January 6th. I chose to do Epiphany today because, to be honest, Epiphany has become a somewhat ignored holiday in the church year. We remember Christmas and Easter is always a big celebration, however, the church has lost a great deal of its understanding concerning Epiphany… what it is… and why we celebrate it.

 In truth, I don’t think we even know what the word, *“epiphany”* means. It is not common to most of our vocabularies. An epiphany is more than just passing on information previously unknown. If I were to step outside and tell you that it is raining, you may not have known that but it’s not an epiphany. Epiphanies are more like a surprise. It is a sudden, intuitive insight into to something. For example, it was not an epiphany today that Randy Paul is our new congregational president. It is an epiphany to Randy that this is actually a position for life!

 Add to that the fact that over the years, tradition has trumped Scripture a bit when it comes to our knowledge of Epiphany. For example, how many wise men were there? Three, right? After all, we do have the song, *“We Three Kings”* and even the artwork on our bulletin cover only shows three. The truth, however, is that Matthew doesn’t indicate a number. He just says, *“Wise men”* or *“magi”* came. It could have been three or three hundred as far as we know. All we know is that there was more than one. On top that, we refer to them as Kings. Matthew doesn’t call them that at all. The word *“magi”* has nothing to do with kingship and has more to do with Zoroastrianism than anything else. And if you don’t know what Zoroastrianism is, we will just save that for another day.

 Isn’t it amazing, though, how easily we add to Scripture? Matthew actually offers so little detail about them but somehow, we believe that we actually know one of them was black, the second white and the third Asian. Nothing like a little political correctness to make sure our Christmas story is inclusive. Matthew again only calls them and magi and we have managed to figure out their race and nationality. Pretty soon we will be coming up with their shoe size, blood type and favorite food!

 That said, since we celebrate Epiphany today, let’s do what good Lutherans do when we want to find out the truth: let’s go back to the Bible. It is only form God’s Word that we learn what Epiphany is all about because it really is not about wise men. It is also not about their gifts. Rather, it is about the revelation, the manifestation, that Jesus is the Savior of *ALL* mankind regardless of race or nationality and that this is without distinction. That is exactly what St. Paul tells us in our epistle lesson for today from Ephesians.

 Now, by way of a little background, Paul’s letter to the Ephesians is different than his other letters in that he does not address any particular heresy or problem. Paul simply wrote this letter to expand the theological horizons of his readers. He wanted them, and us really, to gain a fuller appreciation of the limitless nature of God’s grace.

 And, at this point in the letter, Paul has already explained the Gospel in its truest form. All men and women everywhere, including you and me, were spiritually dead in our transgressions and sin. But God shows us the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God---not by works, so that no one can boast.”*

 Mankind, born dead in his sin, is only made alive by the grace of God. It is not based upon our efforts. It is not based upon our trying hard to be good and then we get rewarded for our behavior. Salvation is a gift, given by God on account of Jesus Christ and what he did on the cross. It is not something earned but given. It is pure gift and given by God himself.

 Now, to be sure, that in and of itself is an epiphany given how we naturally think we are saved. We all naturally believe we have to prove ourselves to God through our obedience; through our being good, or, at a minimum, by our not being bad. As most of you know, as a spill-over from my wife’s job, we have been exposed to a lot of international students. One of the volunteers for International Student Ministries was telling the story of a Chinese student who he had befriended over the years but who was now returning home. So he was very bold in asking him if he understood Christianity. He said, “*Yes, don’t worry about me. I know that Christianity is all about being a good person.”* The volunteer replied to the surprise of the student, *“If it is about me being good, then I have no chance at all!”*

 The volunteer was absolutely right and I am sure provided an epiphany for the student. The good I do will never outweigh the bad I do especially when you consider that we all sin in thought, word and deed. If our only hope is that our good outweighs the bad, we are in trouble because the scales of justice will never tip in our favor.

 God, however, through Jesus Christ, by his death and resurrection, tips the scales of justice in our favor *for* us. That is the revelation of the Gospel and as I said, that is certainly an epiphany but that is not the epiphany about which Paul is talking here in this text. Furthermore, it is not why we celebrate Epiphany. No, the epiphany is what Paul speaks about in verses 4-6. Listen to what he says, *“When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise of Christ Jesus through the gospel.”*

My dear friends in Christ, Epiphany is about the revelation that Jesus’ salvation is not only for the Jews but also for the Gentiles. The wise men, or Magi if you prefer, who came from the east were Gentiles and they came to bow before the Christ child who was not only King of the Jews but their King as well. He was not only the Savior of the Jews but their Savior as well. That is the Epiphany: Gentiles would be included as heirs to the Kingdom of God; equal to the Jews.

 Now, the thought that all nations would participate in God’s plan of salvation was nothing new, or at least it should not have been. In fact, that God wanted all nations to come to him is apparent throughout the Old Testament. Right from the very beginning, in Genesis 12, when God selects Abraham to the father of Israel, he tells him, “*all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”* Did you catch that? *“All peoples.”* Even our Old Testament lesson for today from Isaiah echoes that same thought. Verse 3 states, *“And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.”* To be a bit more precise, the word Isaiah uses for *“nations”* should be translated, “*Gentiles.”*

 However, over time the majority of the people of Israel lost sight of that. Granted, in our day and age this may not seem like any sort of great revelation but believe me, for the people to whom Paul was writing, it would have been. That Gentiles would come to faith and be considered fully and wholly part of God’s people would have been astounding. In our day and age we tend to take it for granted that Gentiles are full heirs; members and sharers of the gospel promise. In fact, to some extent, we have come full circle in that we now may regard Jewish Christians as the rare exceptions in the predominantly Gentile world of modern Christianity. But for the first century Jews, they had developed the idea that Gentiles were excluded simply because they were Gentiles. Probably a more accurate way to put that is that Gentiles were excluded because they were not Jewish. Prejudice set in as God, at least in their minds, became their exclusive property and this despite the fact that God had always said he wanted the Gentiles to come to him also. In fact, Israel’s expressed purpose was to bring the nations to God. We should rightly think of Israel as the Old Testament Church with a mission that was the same as ours today…that is…to evangelize. But, because they saw a distinction between themselves and the Gentiles, they failed.

 I don’t know why it is that mankind develops these prejudices against various groups of people. Well, I guess I do, actually. It’s called sin. Why does one race feel superior to another? Why does one nation feel superior to another? To be honest, these sorts of prejudices are really stupid but do you know what the real shame of it is? The real shame of it is when it prevents us from sharing the gospel as it did with the Hebrews. You see, God never makes distinctions. Let me repeat that…he never makes distinctions between races of people when it comes to his salvation. In truth, from a Scriptural perspective, there is only one race and it is called the human race. And what the bible tells us is that God wants to save the human race . . . all of it! Regardless of skin color or ethnicity, all peoples are sinners. And, just as he did not want Israel to make distinctions, he doesn’t want us to either. We are to take the gospel to all people and if we feel that there are some who are not worthy of the gospel because they look differently, or speak differently than us, then shame on us and we need to repent.

 My dear friends in Christ, do you realize the scope of Epiphany and what it reveals God is doing? God is trying to make for himself one people…one people of God! And he would do it through *“the Way,” “the Truth,”* and *“the Life”* . . . meaning Jesus.

 What was exciting and new was the absolute unity and togetherness that Christ brought. The good news of the gospel did not only announce that Christ had bridged the separation between sinful man and God. It most definitely did that but it also announces that, as Paul says in Ephesians, chapter 2, *“the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility”* between Jews and Gentiles had been destroyed. All those things that separated them, diet, circumcision and the ceremonial law had been removed by Jesus. Jesus fulfilled the Law for all. No longer would the non-kosher diet of the Gentiles make them unclean for entrance into God’s temple. No longer would their uncircumcision make them *“outsiders”* from the Jews. Through the blood of Jesus shed on the cross for all peoples, Jew and Gentile alike, all peoples became God’s people.

 Paul’s point, the epiphany, is that God does not have any prejudices. Jesus came to dispel any notion that there are those who are beyond the reach of his salvation which if very good news for us and do you know why? Look around you…we are all Gentiles! Because of Jesus, there is now no longer any distinction. It doesn’t matter if you are black, white, big, small, short or tall. Your ethnicity or nationality doesn’t matter. As St. Paul tells us in Galatians, *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”*

To put this simply, God wants to save all people which is a good thing because all people need salvation because all people are sinners. There is no such creature as a sinless Jew or a sinless Gentile. All are in need of redemption. All are in need of salvation which is why God sent his son to take our sins and put them to death on the cross. By his grace, he has called us to be his people and that is what we are. We are God’s people, Christians and that is all that matters. And, when I look out at all of you, I see no distinctions. Because of Jesus, we are all brothers and sisters in Christ and heirs to God’s kingdom. That is the epiphany. To God be the glory. In Jesus’ name. Amen.