

1st Sunday of Epiphany
Sermon 1.7.24

Ephesians 3:1-12 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.

Matthew 2:1-12 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,² asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:⁶ "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel." "⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. (579)

Here they come. Once again, once a year: here they come. It's all so familiar, like the overlong carol dedicated to their coming: "We three kings of Orient are..." There's something plodding and predictable about them, which is too bad because what they actually were was frightening.

That's what the story claims, anyway—frightening, and not just to Herod, though there was that. He'd prove so frightened that he'd order the slaughter of all boys in the region under the age of two, unable as he'd be to find this *one* boy.

That's how insecure he was in his position in governance in Judea—that he'd kill children in order to safeguard his power. Powerful people will do that. We know this all too well. Powerful people, some of them, will stop at nothing to secure their power.

But ordinary people, too, just milling about the city: apparently, they found these wise men frightening as well.

Maybe it was that these “wise men” had come from the East—and who does that but conquering armies with imperial aims? Babylon had come out of the East. Assyria had come out of the East. The book of Revelation speaks of an army, like a beast, coming out of the East—and to cataclysmic ends. So, these people, these *Magi*, had come out of the East. Okay. But they hardly presented as an army, right? They were more of a pageant, a parade of opulence and beauty, all in homage, in worship.

So maybe it was the destabilizing effect they had on Herod. Maybe “all Jerusalem” was frightened because they knew a frightened Herod was about as frightening a thing as could be. They knew a frightened person in power, fighting to keep his power, was as big a threat as ever there was—a rabid animal backed into a corner. That makes sense. That's probably it.

But I can think of one more reason. Maybe they were afraid of how these wise men knew what they knew. These wise men, these *magi*: they knew the night sky. Astronomers and astrologers both, combined, they knew how to read the stars. And this, maybe, would have been felt as threatening, unholy. It would have smacked of idolatry, to know the heavens so well. Worse, it might have smacked of sorcery, wizardry—these *magi* knowing as if by magic, which is where the word magic comes from, and which fuels an evergreen anxiety among the religiously orthodox.

But especially *these* religiously orthodox. The Jews, and eventually the Christians: these were to be a people who knew “by the book.” They, and eventually we, would be people of the book. We look less to the creation for divine wisdom, and more to its creator. We are to worship less the creation for its power and wonder, and more the creator of the creation, this creator as come to be known by the book, the Bible, our book.

But these *magi* were perfectly comfortable looking to the creation, studying it for what it might reveal as for enduring truth or new insight. Brand new insight! A birth! A wondrous birth.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, they'd followed a wandering bit of the creation, a storied star which wasn't fixed in its spot in space (if indeed space can be thought to have fixed spots). And they made the assumption that any event significant enough to warrant a wandering star had to be an event to take place in Jerusalem. This was the capital city of this otherwise backwater region of the empire. This was the glittering power-center of this otherwise insignificant people, the Jews of the Roman Empire. Of course, an important birth would happen here!

When they reached the city, though, they learned otherwise, and from the people of the book who know better because of their book. Herod gathered them, the chief priests and the Scribes, and then called for the Magi that they might hear as well. The prophet Micah had written 500 years earlier that it wouldn't happen in Jerusalem but that "...you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel." You had to be something of a specialist to know about Micah. A minor prophet speaking of a minor village in which would take place a major birth: only someone deep into the weeds of Scripture would know about this nearly silent promise.

Little Bethlehem. Can anything good come out of so little a place? (That's irony, folks. One of Jesus' earliest disciples would begin with that question. He learned better.)

And so it was by combination, syncretism, if you will. A *mélange* of knowings would make a way for Christ in the world and for arriving to Christ in the world. What the orthodox knew, the pagans didn't; and what the pagans knew, the orthodox would never even have imagined worthy of knowing; and only by a coming together of these two bodies of knowledge would the new revelation of God be made known: very cool! And a favorite implication of this story, to me at least.

But you know, it should have been *this* that really struck fear in the hearts of all in Jerusalem. Though it would have required a *lot* of foresight, it should have been this that had people on edge in Jerusalem. Though Herod's dangerous fear would have been a more immediate concern, the question of how we know what we know is just as destabilizing a question, if one that plays out in the much longer term.

Three years ago yesterday, a mob of people stormed the capital building in Washington D.C. They were armed with all sorts of dangerous things—clubs, poles, a noose or two, in a few cases firearms. But the most dangerous thing they came armed with was their knowing, their being so sure of something that simply wasn't true.

It is not true that the election was wrongly called.

It is not true that the transfer of power from one president to the next was wrongly to go ahead.

These things are not true, and the phrasing even of these things untrue must be carefully done because in debunking what's false, if you restate the falsehood, you reinforce the falsehood. The ear doesn't pick up the correction as much as the confirmation. That's just how the human mind works.

And so, to a whole subset of our society these falsehoods are believed to be true: they are *known*—and for this false knowledge, these people are potentially very dangerous, for how do you persuade people that something false is actually false?

Epistemology: the thinking around how we know what we know: this isn't necessarily the most exciting thing to have come at you in a sermon on a Sunday morning, especially not a snowy one when you might have simply stayed asleep. But it's quite fundamental to the project of faith, to the living of the faith into which we are called and by which we are convicted. How do we know what we know, what we're willing to organize our lives around, what we receive not by sight but by faith?

It wasn't Paul who wrestled with this question in the letter to the Ephesians, it was someone else doing so in the name and tradition of Paul. This letter comes later than the letters established to have been written by Paul. But it does yet engage a question Paul first engaged, whether or not the Gentiles could become a part of this whole endeavor, and, if so, on what terms, by what legalities and practices and traditions; indeed, whether or not Jesus had something to say to, and do for, the Gentiles, or if this Jew born to Jews had only really to do with Jews.

Paul had a bit of fight on his hands because it was always a scandal whenever the Jews proposed working in alliance with non-Jews. This was true for many tribes—was and still is. There's often endemic to group identity a proscription about allying with those not of the group. For the people Israel and Judah, this was part of the divine charter. One main quality of this people of God was as set apart, a people different from the other tribes of the region.

What's more, their differences were to result in a quality of experience in life that would appeal to other nations, other peoples. Their way of justice, of mutual care, of concern for the poor and the widow and the orphan and the stranger in their midst, their practice of sabbath and sabbatical and the jubilee year, giving people and beasts of burden and all the creation a rest from the imperative of production: every seven days, a rest; every seven years, a fallowing; ever forty-nine years, a release. his people with such practices were to be as a light to nations. Other tribes would

stream to their way. Peoples would turn to their God, having come to see that the dictates of this God are dictates of love and ones that produce lives of bounty and joy.

It's the *how* of that, though, where the trouble starts. It's the "on what terms" that the problems begin to mount. You know, congregations will often say they want to grow in membership. But often those same congregations don't want to change. And it's less that you have to change in order to attract new people and more that new people coming will necessarily change a settled culture. Eventually someone new will say, "This hymn is a favorite from my childhood," and the settled congregation might well say, "We don't know that hymn. We won't sing that hymn."

The stakes were quite a bit higher for the people of Israel and Judea who'd just had born unto them a baby who would come to change everything. Born of the Jews yet for the world: this is something we might easily say, but how that would happen is a thing very much more difficult.

So, eventually comes the time when Paul suggests that Gentiles, pagans, could join in this common life, but not in such a way that conforms to established practice, *orthodox* practice. Gentiles were now included, but not required to live by Torah, the law. They could eat the foods they'd always eaten, wash or not wash as they always had done, which, when it came some pagans, was truly revolting. All because maybe this new way, this following of Christ, could actually be apparently no way, or any way. There were no dietary laws or lifestyle regulations. There were no religious rites other than the most bare-bones things: baptize people in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and do so in any old place, whether a mighty river or a convenient puddle; and gather to break bread, hear the word, and sing some hymns—and maybe even someday do it on Zoom. Other than that, use your best judgement!

This was the mystery Paul's student would call forth decades later in his letter to the Ephesians. He would write, as we just heard, "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: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel...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, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; 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."

Four times here our writer mentions this mystery. Did you notice that? Four times, the word, “mystery,” that something once known and understood as exclusive and prescribed has now become inclusive of all and led by but a spirit. *This, this ephemera*: this is what was now known.

But was it knowledge you could trust? Was it true? Because how do we know what we know, and how do we know we can trust it as true?

Today is the Sunday that begins the season of Epiphany. Yesterday, January 6th was Epiphany itself, when the *magi* are remembered at last to have arrived in Bethlehem with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, the 12th day of Christmas that brings to a close this shortest and shocking season. A baby has been born into the world, a tiny baby in a nothing town among unimportant people: a pebble dropped into still water whose ripples only ever widen.

Today is the first day of a new season, a season spent contemplating who Jesus was and who he is and how we know it and what all that means. These might seem like questions merely in the abstract, but ideas have a way of creating reality in ways I for one only supposed was true before witnessing the events on January 6th, 2021. That day, lies became violence, as slippery a process as mud on a slope. It coincided, or course, with the pandemic, when I spent part of almost every day playing out in my head once again what we doing (in staying home) and why we were doing it (because of a virus that was new and contagious and deadly to some and dangerous to others though we knew not whom or why or how very connected we all actually are) and whether it all still made sense. And, as it happens, this intellectual exercise was demanding and grueling, took effort of the sort you usually expend at the gym.

For what it’s worth, this is the same effort I bring to the questions our faith demands. What do we believe, why do we believe it, and what does it look like in playing out in the world? I tell you this because I want you to trust that we’d be right to join with all Jerusalem in finding the Magi frightening, that their inclusion of themselves in this once-exclusive story is in fact destabilizing in such a way that shakes foundations, but also that we’d be wise to trust that the mystery yet being made known is one of good news, one of kindness and grace, one of generosity and good will. Jesus even gave us a guidepost for our discerning whether or not our religion in his name is true: “You can judge it by its fruits.”

This sermon, like most, is not a final word. It marks again but the beginning of a life-long project, a lives-long project, which is discerning the will of God whose aim and end is love, love for all creation, love for all being, and whose ways for revealing this will to us are dizzying in their multitude. We discern together.

Thanks be to God.