

JANUARY 3, 2021 WORSHIP SERVICE

MORNING PRAYER – LOIS HARDER

Thank you, God, for new beginnings, for times when we can turn the page, declare something “finished” and move on to new things. We commend to you the year 2020 with all of its opportunities and challenges, its losses and disappointments. And with your help, we look forward to this new year – knowing it will also hold challenges and losses as well as unforeseen opportunities and joy. We will follow your son, the Light of the world, into this new year, confident of his steadfast love for us and committed to living lives that reflect his love into the world.

O God, we offer you the prayers of our hearts this morning. We pray for those who are sick and in need of healing. We think of Pastor Juan’s family, especially his daughter and any others who might also have been exposed to the virus. We pray for Don and June Hiebert as they continue to regain strength and health. We thank you for healing that has already happened for them and ask that that would continue. Be with Devon, DeWayne and other family members and friends who are supporting them through this time. We pray for Gloria Yoder, Pastor Caleb’s mother, as well as his dad, Galen and his sisters as they support one another in this time of Gloria’s illness and hospitalization. We thank you, also, for the healing she has experienced and we ask for further healing and a return to wholeness for her. Gracious God, we pray for Joyce Bergen as she enters a time of treatment and unknowns with this recent diagnosis she has received. We trust your Spirit of Love and Compassion that will be her constant companion in the coming days and weeks as well as for Dan and their family. We pray for the doctors, Lord that they will use their medical know-how for Joyce’s well-being and we ask for healing and health for her. We ask for your presence with Mary Lou as she recovers from this broken bone, is in rehab and as she and Glen discern what will come next for them. God, you know the names and needs of others among us who are undergoing treatments for various illnesses or who have procedures coming up in the next days. Our prayers extend to all in our midst who are in need of your healing. And we confess God, that is every single one of us. Whether our wounds are physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, we are all your wounded children and we need your healing love and care with us and for us.

Some of us are wounded by the keen losses we are feeling.

We pray for Brian Burkholder and the whole Burkholder family, Rachael, Kara, Alyssa and Caleb, as well as Brian’s father and siblings who are in Canada. We thank you for technology that allows them to keep in touch and even see each other, even as we acknowledge the difficulty of not being together physically in this time to grieve their mother and grandmother’s loss and celebrate her life together. Comfort them and may your Spirit sustain them and uphold them. We pray for Gail Graber, chaplain at Bethesda, who has buried both of her parents within this last month. That is a heavy loss for her and her family and we ask for your presence and love to

surround them, God. Be with Gail as she does her pastoral work at Bethesda; give her strength and energy as she offers the same comfort she needs.

O God, in these long, dark days, we know that YOU know the pain, the loss, the difficulty of these times we are in. We thank you for sending Jesus, the Light into our darkness – the Light that the darkness cannot overcome. Keep our eyes fixed on the Light as we move through these dark days. Keep our hearts fixed on the stories of your steadfast love. Keep our spirits fixed on the covenant you have made with us, so that we may have courage and wisdom and determination to love you, to love our neighbor, to remember that your gospel and your church is for all people, everywhere. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

Provider God, thank you for what we have. We ask you to receive and bless what we give back to you, through the church. May our gifts and our intentions honor you and may they be part of what brings your kingdom here, on earth, as it is in heaven. Amen.

SERMON: MYSTERY OF CHRIST – PASTOR CALEB

Ephesians 3:1-12

Some of you may remember a few weeks ago there was a historic event in which Jupiter and Saturn appeared to almost coincide in the night sky more closely than they have since the middle ages.

It seems like several times a year there is something happening in the night sky that hasn't happened since the middle ages. I didn't get to see it on the night the two planets were the closest, because Austin and I got out there too late. The next day I'm pretty sure I saw the two planets peaking through the trees across the street.

When I was a kid, something about astronomy gripped me. I was hooked by the idea of the solar system. I memorized facts about the planets, and started a number of illustrated books about the planets that I never seemed to finish before something else captured my attention.

Epiphany is a day we normally connect with the story of the Magi coming to see Jesus as Tim dramatize for us. We don't know what kind of light the Magi would have seen. Surely, they were careful observers of the lights of the sky and would have noticed something unusual like two planets coinciding.

The passage I just read from Ephesians is one of the scripture readings associated with Epiphany. Most of us are already pretty familiar with the story of the Magi visiting the baby Jesus and bringing gifts.

The passage in Ephesians connects in several ways – the Magi were Gentiles—non-Jews—and Ephesians is about the inclusion of people from the nations in God's family. The Magi receive a revelation from observing the sky, and Ephesians is about the revelation of God's formerly secret plan to bring all people together through Jesus Christ.

Even the idea of light is present, though it's not clear from the translation I read.

In the NASB Bible, verse 9 describing Paul's mission says it is *"to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God."*

REVELATION AND MYSTERY

During our series on the book of Revelation, you might remember that the meaning of "revelation" or "apocalypse" is "uncovering" or "unveiling" what was hidden. There's a lot of that going on in the letter to the Ephesians.

Light, illumination is part of the idea of revelation. In all, I counted at least six words that have to do with revealing, illuminating, or making something known.

That exactly is this big thing being unveiled?

The answer comes in verse 6: *"This plan is that the Gentiles would be coheirs and parts of the same body, and that they would share with the Jews in the promises of God in Christ Jesus through the gospel."*

Coheirs, parts of the same body, and sharing together in the promises of God.

I know that you've all heard the Jew-Gentile thing before. It's difficult to wrap our minds around how radical this really is. It's like crossing the boundaries between Democrat and Republican, working class and white collar, black or person of color and white, Spanish-speaking and English-speaking, conservative and liberal, urban and rural, wealthy and poor, citizen and undocumented.

The list could of course go on. You see why this is ambitious. We might look like we are all the same at Alexanderwohl, but even our congregation with our homogeneity also tries to bridge significant differences.

What is God up to?

One of the key words in Ephesians is "mystery." This word occurs three times in these 12 verses, and a number of times elsewhere in Ephesians.

To our ears, a mystery is something that no one really understands, but in the New Testament, "mystery" is some piece of God's redemptive work that previously wasn't understood and now has come to light.

For this reason, the Common English Bible translates it as "secret plan," as in verse 9: "9 God sent me to reveal the secret plan that had been hidden since the beginning of time by God."

STEWARDSHIP

Another important idea in Ephesians 3 is stewardship – being faithful with something of value entrusted to you.

Verse 2 talks about Paul's stewardship or commission of God's grace for the sake of the church. This whole thing is permeated by the grace of a loving God, and Paul became an administer of that grace the same way that a CFO is a steward of the finances of an organization.

The word "economy" comes straight from the Greek word for stewardship. It's an economy not of dollars and cents, but of grace.

In verse 9, the idea of stewardship comes up again – stewardship of the mystery or secret plan hidden from the ages. Again as it is in the NASB: "*to bring to light* what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God."

The first part of Paul's mission is to proclaim the good news of the alternative sort of wealth found in Christ to people of every nation (verse 8).

The second half is to illuminate or bring to light, the special trust or stewardship of God's secret plan.

This time, I think the stewardship belongs to the whole church. The reason I read it that way is because in the very next verse, through the church the many-sided wisdom of God is made known to the powers and authorities in spiritual realms.

In the well-known "armor of God" illustration in chapter 6, Paul will tell us our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this present darkness. We also know that Christ is far above any of these powers.

We don't talk very often talk about demonic powers in our daily life in our culture, but I think an appropriate translation into our worldview is many of the "isms" that compete and control our lives – capitalism (or socialism), racism, authoritarianism, militarism, consumerism – these systemic forces that aren't the work of any one person, but have a spiritual aspect.

PHEME Perkins points out that it's an audacious claim to say that the church would have this public role for heavenly forces, when Christians in the first century had no buildings or public status, unlike the church today. They hardly seemed influential, but this vulnerable group of people of multiple ethnicities, multiple social classes, slave and free, men and women, Jews and Gentiles, were integral to God's covert plan.

Maybe *you* are part of a covert plan, and didn't even know it!

As you may have caught from Lois' pastoral prayer earlier, my mom remains hospitalized with Covid. There have certainly been emotional ups and downs this past week – both with our concern for her and her own exhaustion and discouragement.

Currently, things look promising. Yet recovery is a long process, far longer than my mom bargained for.

Our prayers are not only for physical healing, but also for renewed spirits for her, as she holds steady.

This is our first Sunday in the new year. A year ago, none of us had any idea what 2020 would be like, and it's safe to say that no one went through the year without some level of disruption and letting go of normal.

Like my mom, all of us are needing to hold steady in one way or another. For some, it takes all your energy to keep your head above water. This too shall pass.

2020 was a year of revelation, and what it revealed about both our country and the church was mixed. Part of what was revealed was positive – we can adapt much more than we thought. We can make sacrifices for one another, work together, and support one another.

There's also an ugly side to the revelation too – the revelation that our advanced, wealthy, technological society isn't so removed from suffering as we thought. The year has pulled the curtain off of disparities – as people of color experience higher rates of infection and death, as many lose work and struggle to feed their families, while the stock market behaves as if we weren't in a pandemic.

We are polarized with different concepts of what is fact, what is reality, and these painful divisions exist even in our local communities. We also feel uncertainty in the local economy.

In 2021, we need to hold steady.

Not only that, but we need to resist only thinking about what's wrong with the world, and reclaim a sense of wonderment at God's bold and surprising plan of using a homeless, executed Jew as a center of a transformative movement to create a new humanity out of the many opposing, warring, and competing people groups in the world.

God has a mysterious, secret plan to reconcile us and to transform us into a new humanity.

There's no bigger vision than that, but whether or not you wanted something else on your plate, you've been made an administer of this ambitious plan.

May we be up to the task.

Questions for reflection:

1. What do you think it looks like for the “manifold wisdom of God” to be made known to the powers through the Church? How does that happen?
2. How do we wrap our minds around what a new revelation it was for the first Christians to understand that God was creating a people out of all nations?

BENEDICTION

May Christ live in your hearts through faith.

May you have strong roots in love, with the power to grasp love's width and length, height and depth.

May you know the love of Christ so that you will be filled with the fullness of our God who can do far more than we could ask or imagine.