

Isaiah 60:1-6 and Ephesians 3:1-12

Paul writes Ephesians from a Roman jail cell, and he reminds his readers of the reason for his suffering. He was committed to a universal and multi-ethnic Church. That commitment led to his imprisonment, first in Jerusalem, then Caesarea, and finally being sent to Rome. When he visited Jerusalem, after his third missionary journey, his opponents claimed he had violated Temple Law. In truth, they were angry with him for proclaiming a message that God's favor and salvation were also meant for the Gentiles. This offended the sensibilities of many first century Jews who believed God's favor was for them and them only. They were uniquely chosen of all the nations of the world for salvation.

Paul argues they were wrong about this exclusive claim. In verse 3, he says, "God revealed his secret plan to me." The Greek word is MYSTERION, the root of our word mystery. Mystery is used to describe God's purpose for history, which is present in Scripture, but only revealed to the wise and the Spirit-enlightened.

The origin of this idea is Daniel chapter 2. The Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, has a disturbing dream. No one is able to interpret it until Daniel hears of it. He calls it a secret and a mystery, then goes on to explain that this dream reveals God's plan and purpose for history.

Our Old Testament text for this morning from Isaiah is an example of this mystery being present in Scripture. The prophecy is fulfilled in the coming of the Magi, which we remember on Epiphany, which is January 6, the end of the Christmas season.

The light of Jerusalem shines in the midst of the deep darkness that covers the world. The nations, meaning, the Gentiles, see the light and come to it, bringing with them the wealth of many lands. Isaiah mentions several nations in verse 6, also in verse 7 which we didn't read. Sheba and Midian are the most familiar to us from other places in the Bible. The other lands are also lands of the east, modern day Arabia. These lands were known for gold, frankincense, and myrrh, among other things.

Paul explains that God's mystery, his plan and purpose for history, is to give the Gentiles an equal share with the Jews in God's riches. Now there were some Jews in the first century who thought that the Gentiles might have some share in God's salvation, but not an equal share. And certainly not without taking the step of full conversion to Judaism. But Paul insists no, in Christ, in the New Covenant, both Jew and uncircumcised Gentile have an equal share in God's salvation.

We are all “heirs” together. In the Old Testament, the language of being an heir was used to refer to inheriting the Promised Land, the land of Canaan. In the New Testament, it is used in reference to inheriting the New Earth, the New Creation.

So Jew and Gentile are joined together in one Body. God’s purpose is to create a new humanity in the Church, a universal and multi-ethnic Church. And God’s purpose is to show his wisdom to “all the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.”

In the Jewish mind, there were angelic and demonic powers at work behind all the nations of the world. Those are the powers in mind here. The unity of the Church displays God’s rule over all creation. The Church is God’s ultimate purpose in history.

And we find our purpose in joining our lives to God’s ultimate purpose. The Church is God’s story for history, and we join our stories to his story.

Paul’s passionate plea to the Ephesian church, and all churches, is not to allow his suffering for God’s purpose to be in vain. It would be in vain if we allowed the Church’s unity of Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free to disintegrate into division and strife.

I think the good news is that, for the most part, we have seen the end of the thought that some people are less than others and some are more than others in our world. And I say “for the most part” because, obviously, there are still some in our world who think in those ways. Fortunately, those thoughts are usually no longer acceptable in our world. But we need to be on guard. Thoughts like those have no place in the Kingdom of God. Full equality before God is the only way of thinking that’s acceptable in the Kingdom. And we need to beware of any thoughts otherwise. Because they will come. Those thoughts will come into our minds and we will hear them from others. And not only the suffering of Paul but the suffering of Christ for all the world is in vain if we allow them to take root in our minds. Any thinking that any group of people is superior or inferior to others is in direct contradiction to the gospel of Jesus Christ.