

Epiphany Sunday 2019
Sermon 1.6.19
Scripture:

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.

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. 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 was as big a threat as ever there was—a rabid animal backed into a corner. That makes sense.

Or 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—which (I think) 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. Remember how Harry Potter landed among certain American Christian groups? The wisdom discerned at Hogwarts and among other *magi*: it's downright frightening among a certain upright set.

It's funny, then, that these *magi* would be the means for leading the religiously upright to the Messiah. Funny: this is one of those times when the testimony of the Bible undermines the fiercest assertions of “Bible believers.” I've said it before, and I'll say it again: the Bible is one ironic text, its own critique written right into its sworn-by pages. It's an M.C. Escher drawing, where you're going up the staircase and down it at the same time. It undoes the very thing it's purported to knit together: religion.

But, of course, the chief priests and the scribes did know by orthodox means, and this proved just as important. The wise men, interpreting the new star they noticed to be portentous of a newborn king, had assumed this king could be found in Jerusalem. In the city David established, in the city of the greatest king Israel would ever know: of course a new king would be born here. The chief priests and scribes, however, knew otherwise, as the prophet Micah had written five hundred years earlier: “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.” That they knew this, though it was written so long ago, prophesied by one of the but minor prophets: of course.

And so it was by combination: the Messiah would be found so to be worshiped by a combination of ways of wisdom. 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. And there we have it!

I'll bet this is the mystery spoken of four times in the portion of the letter to the Ephesians that we just heard. This mystery that was made known to our writer by revelation; this mystery that had for long generations remained hidden, only recently made known; this mystery whose plan for unfurling had been hidden for ages in God until the time was ripe for Christ to come and for a convergence to take place that what had once seem clearly and cleanly to be distinguished from one another now must be encountered as also of God: this mystery is a mealy mess, an entertaining of the possibility that the unlikeliest places might also house God, the unlikeliest people might also bear forth God's wisdom and will, the unlikeliest situations might also manifest God's Holy Spirit.

For this letter to the Ephesians, the question of whether the gospel should be brought to people beyond the Jews was long settled. This was an animating question in the life and work of Paul himself, so this is an animating concern in much of Paul's writing. Addressed mostly to congregations that encompassed both Jews and Gentiles, these many letters in the New Testament concern themselves with urging upon the readers, those in these very congregations, that Jew and Gentile are now together to understand themselves as heirs of God's ancient promises. But that animating concern was by now settled. The church had moved beyond being an exclusively Jewish

enterprise, had moved even beyond being and Jewish-and-Gentile enterprise, was now looking even beyond that old binary—which suggests Paul likely didn't write this letter to the Ephesians. This likely came a half-century after the letters Paul indisputably wrote, probably written by a disciple of Paul, very much in the spirit of Paul, but with more complicated syntax and more sophisticated and nuanced ideas.

This is not to sleight what Paul managed to do—which was nothing less than an imaginative revolution of Copernican scale and scope. His writing, though, was exploratory and experimental. He was writing into the dark of the mystery proclaimed here. Each word he put to parchment was a match struck to flickering. By the time of this letter, though, much of the yet-to-be-explored world had been explored and had begun to be understood. Much of that mystery, of which Paul caught but the earliest light, had been unfolding for entering into and understanding. The clean lines of the world would become blurred—and by the fact of God's free-ranging blessing. The clear distinctions between regions and peoples and ways of life had come into question—and by the fact of God's having himself blurred the boundaries in taking on flesh in Jesus Christ. The orthodoxies and unorthodoxies were now revealed all as one big, confusing heterodoxy, or maybe even paradoxy—which is to say there are no bad guys and no good guys in this blessed, fallen world, no heroes and no villains in this long, unfolding story, no saved and no damned in God's redeeming sight, but all, every single particle of every single thing is somehow within the reach and realm of God's reconciling grace.

Good news!

And, if we're honest and we're serious, then we'd be right to be frightened, too.

I'll admit, I can't relate to the fear "all Jerusalem" had as regards the magi. I can't relate to more contemporary manifestations of this fear, either. I just don't think I was raised to prize orthodoxy in, really, whatever form orthodoxies take, be they religious or political or social or ideological. My upbringing, while orderly, was in no way strict, so when things depart from stricture, I'm okay.

That said, I can muster fear at the prospect of life, and life together, now playing out amidst a social context of everything thrown into question, every once clear thing now cast into doubt. When old values, long settled, have been upset; when established truths meet with skepticism (and, worse, eventually cynicism): that's pretty frightening. If we come not only not to

know what we have long known, but also not to know how we're to know what we're to know, that's pretty frightening. And, if you ask me, this is where we find ourselves now—not merely in a crisis of authority but (far worse) a crisis of epistemology, a shaking of the foundations of knowledge, common knowledge.

How do we know what we know; and how do we know we can trust that?

What way of knowing is the most reliable, the most sure; and are there any ways of knowing, or sources of knowledge, that are altogether out of bounds? If so, how can we tell them apart from all others? And who has discerned them? Who decided them so?

There are groups of people who swear by the power of divine revelation to establish common knowledge; and there are groups of people who say revelation, that sudden striking of a creative insight, is an absurd way to establish common knowledge.

There are groups of people who swear by the power of human reason to establish common knowledge; and there are groups of people who say human reason is just the mind talking to itself, even justifying itself, and is hardly the fixed thing it purports to be, that it privileges a certain few even as it swears to be even-handed, making it even more absurd than revelation as a means for knowledge.

There are groups of people who swear by the scientific method as the means for establishing common knowledge; and there are groups of people who say the scientific method then casts out of consideration, and therefore out of validity, too many things that play out in our common life in very real ways, if not measurable ways, if not provable ways.

There are groups of people who swear by experts, and there are groups of people who distrust all experts. There are people who swear by Fox News and people who swear by the New York Times. There are people who believe common knowledge is established by the force of personality, and there are people (like me) who say, "Find me an escape pod from that too subjective society." (For this is the risk of when nihilism takes over: authoritarianism finds it an opportune time.)

There are people who say we should take Trump seriously but not literally, and there are people who say we should take Trump literally but not seriously, and then there are people (like me) who wonder what's the difference and who suppose that, if this is where we are, parsing the

speech of leaders for possible meaning or deception or at the very least some intention behind that meaning or deception, then we're in a lot of trouble.

I recently read a long article about personality disorders and how “Bible-believing” Christians are to understand them. The writer had to take a long walk from the established assumption that all legitimate knowledge is founded in the Bible to the possibility that personality disorders as explained in the DSM (the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) might be a valid and even helpful framework for understanding and treating those who seem to suffer them, both they themselves and those in relation to them, all in spite of the fact that it's not biblically founded. “Wow,” was my thought in reading the article. “I did not need to take that walk.” I don't have a problem with the fact that the DSM is authoritative even though it wasn't written by God (since, neither was the Bible, not strictly speaking). No, I can respect the authority of the DSM at least as far as it means to have some authority—that is, as regards mental disorders.

But what happens when everything is held so skeptically, when nothing is felt as common and established ground from which to start? (And please remember, we have the *magi* to thank for this morass. How did those early Jerusalemites know this?)

I think what happens is eventual cynicism, and then nihilism, an exhausted or gleeful desire just to burn it all down. And once there, just watch for the strong man because he's been waiting for this opportune time.

A podcast I was recently listening to, called “Left, Right, and Center,” had the panelists discussing the government shutdown, one of whom said he thought Trump had little incentive to strike a deal so to open the government back up because he has little interest in seeing the government work. A second panelist noted, “A nihilist will always win a fight. Someone who is willing to see the world burn is going to have an upper hand over people who aren't [so willing.]”

It put me in mind of a Christian film we as a family just watched. We Goodmans have a new New Year's Eve tradition. We watch a trilogy of films, beginning around dinnertime and ending around midnight when we ring in the New Year and then drag ourselves upstairs to bed. In our second year of this tradition, we watched the trilogy of Star Wars prequels last year, and watched the Batman trilogy this year, Christopher Nolan's brooding take on the Dark Night. They're good movies, but the best of them is the middle one, the one whose main villain is the Joker, he whose main villainy is his nihilism, his desire just to see the world burn.

And it would have (burned) except that the two masses of people he pitted against one another to see who he get to kill whom decided that neither massive group would give themselves over to becoming mass-murders, that they'd rather be mass-murdered instead. A boatload of upright city-dwellers and a boatload of escaped prisoners both decided independent of the other that they wouldn't detonate the other ferry, that they'd rather run the risk of being detonated themselves.

Whoops, was my thought, Christopher Nolan just made a Christian movie—and here Mel Gibson had tried hard to make the most Christian movie of all. But, no, *The Passion of Christ* has got nothing on all those Gothamites who decided victory would be won only if they refused to fight, only if they gave themselves up that all those others might live.

As for the Joker, I imagine he was disappointed, and might even have gone away, looking for another opportune time.

This is Epiphany Sunday, Epiphany as comes every January 6th when the *magi* are remembered at last to have arrived in Bethlehem with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. By this, we embark on a whole season of Epiphany, which this year will be fairly long, seven weeks, as Easter is late, meaning Lent (the six-week season prior to Easter) will start late, meaning Epiphany (the four-to-nine week season prior to Lent) will be fairly long. This is a season spent contemplating who Jesus was and is, and what that means for us; considering also the events in his life that made manifest his true being, both divine and human; and begging the questions as to what we know and how we know it. An Epiphany! Sudden knowledge come by mysterious means!

These are destabilizing questions. They cause our footing to slip, our standing to teeter, until we topple with nothing to catch us but either nothing at all or the very substance of God and the insistence of the gospel that the cross of self-giving love is the ultimate way, such that whatever else might purport to be wisdom or good will or sure knowledge must be measured by that standard, timeless and true.

The *magi*, with their strange knowledge, were ones to usher in all these questions—and it's God's grace that in them the answer is revealed, the answer being that the wisdom and knowledge which make for life's thriving are not so limited as we might expect them to be, are indeed broadly revealed and widely to be found, which is good news—and frightening news. Frightening for it making the task of knowing all the more challenging and for it increasing the risk that we'd simply

give up and give over all power to the one with the strongest personality and the least to lose; but good for its assurance that God never ceases in the work of redemption and reconciliation, that truth never fails in face of falsehood (not for long), that love is the most powerful force in the world: this is a long game God is playing and would have us play as well. And, no, this might not make any given moment easier to read or any given decision easier to make with any certainty other than the certainty of faith, but it will at least ease our fear that we might be misguided or mistaken in some irredeemable way.

We won't be.

God's got us.

Truth holds us.

In Jesus, we meet Emmanuel, that is, the promise of God-with-us, the promise that God is at work in all things for good. This season we celebrate this. Good thing it'll be a long one.

Thanks be to God.