

God's Call
Ephesians 3: 1-12
Epiphany Sunday

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Please pray with me. Illumine your word by your Holy Spirit, O God. Let your good news radiate from these pages. Let your Epiphany grace break into our hearts and minds. Captivate all who hear these words, that we might believe and obey, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we celebrate Epiphany. Often the text for today is the gospel story of the magi following the star and ending their journey to find the savior, baby Jesus, in the manger. Another text for Epiphany is the one we read today in the third chapter in the book of Ephesians. Here Paul writes to the church in Ephesus about God's call for his life, Paul's epiphany.

This is the reason that I, Paul, am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. 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. 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. 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. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him. **This is the Word of the Lord.**

If you read this text without knowing what the culture and context are, you lose the immensity of what Paul entered into when God called him to bring the gentiles into the family. The use of the word adoption is approximate here. The gentiles were always viewed, and indeed viewed themselves as outsiders to God's family. They were not the People of Israel. Here those who were not born into the family find a place that claims them as equal.

In Ephesus choosing to follow Christ was choosing a life in direct contrast to the culture. Ephesus was active, and vital, with all kinds of people. It was diverse and cosmopolitan. There were Jews and gentiles, Greeks and Romans, traders, artisans, and merchants all rubbing shoulders in this teeming port city. While at the same time it was a part of the Roman Empire and as such was subject to the laws of Caesar. Not only the laws of Caesar, but also the laws of the Torah for the Jewish members of the population.

Paul's epiphany was not one that most would shout with joy about. God didn't send Paul to carry the message of Christ to his fellow Jews. People he knew intimately. With his Jewish brothers and sisters Paul was able to speak the same language, he knew their traditions. When Paul moved beyond the Jewish community to evangelize to those outside it, he sailed into uncharted waters. Paul went to the gentiles, Greeks, and pagans, and as my Greek Orthodox professor like to call those of us who were not orthodox—the barbarians.

Judaism had a fixed set of rules and traditions that Paul knew, but here there were all kinds of pagans. The magical arts were so prolific that often magic books were referred to as "Ephesian Books." The most popular pagan

shrine in antiquity, that of the goddess Artemis (or Diana to the Romans,) was in Ephesus and this brought droves of pilgrims.

Ephesus was one of the three or four largest cities in the Roman Empire, and possessed unbelievable wealth. It was also a center for scholars and intellectual investigation. Ephesus had just about everything and everyone. Just the place for Paul...

This was Paul's epiphany. God revealed to him the unexpected mission of evangelizing to the gentiles. This unexpected gift was in opposition to what his life had been before. Remember he was a passionate Jewish persecutor of Christians. He was one of the best. And as a strict follower of the Torah, he stayed away from gentiles, they were the unclean. Here God calls him to be in intimate contact with them, to call them brothers and sisters, to bring those who had always been outsiders into the fold. And Ephesus had them in abundance.

How did Paul do this? He trusted that Christ had given him this mission, and he trusted that because Christ had called him, that the Holy Spirit would guide him. He also trusted that his other gifts would aid him in this mission. He could support himself as a tent maker, and this also allowed him to assist others who were in need. He was fearless and passionate. All these attributes supported what he was doing.

His knowledge of the Jewish faith allowed him to preach in the synagogues before he moved out to the gentiles, and his tenacious spirit was one of his greatest gifts for evangelism. He was more than willing to take on the mission for Christ. He dove into the areas that would be the hardest in which to evangelize – Corinth and here in Ephesus. Most of his gifts were present before his conversion. He opened his heart to God and the Holy Spirit led him, using the gifts he already had. Gifts he never suspected would be

used for this purpose, but they were invaluable. God was with him all along preparing him for this work. And Paul viewed this as a gift!

Isn't it astounding how much Ephesus and our own culture parallel each other? The diversity of people, and belief systems, institutions, and governing bodies. There are over 20 different belief systems in the US, and that does not take into account the different denominations or sects within those systems. We have the national, state, and local governments and laws that come in almost as many varieties.

We hear in scripture that we are called to the same mission. What might the epiphany that is waiting for you look like? Do we open our ears and hearts to God to accept this gift? To care for all God's children, to offer them the good news of God's abundant love in Christ? Not just those who look like us or believe what we believe? To let go of our need to control to discover our epiphany. Where is God going to use your particular gifts?

It is difficult to bring this radically different message out to a culture that is not open to receiving it, a culture that gives every indication that it does not want or value this message, this gift? How do we present it?

We approach it with the awe and wonder of the magi. As if (and it is) the most exciting mission of our lives. Paul's difficult task was to not only bring the message of Christ to the gentiles, but to also fold them into the people of God. To invite them into the family, to accept God's radical hospitality.

If we strive to fold others into God's ministry and the family, think of how it would change the world? We would have to let go of judgement and prejudices, of anger and resentment, all those feelings and emotions that keep us from each other, and keep us from God. We would be free and open; forgiveness would be our first thought.

We cannot carry this message out as if it were a burden because that would be reflected in our attitude. Who wants to join in a burdensome task?

We have seen over the past decades that carrying our faith as a burden only separates us. And Christ tells us that his burden is light. The load is lightened when we share it; carry it with the love for our neighbor that Christ commands of us. This really is a gift, the letting go and accepting the gift God has for us. We draw closer to each other while we draw closer to God; we live God with us as we proclaim the gift of grace we receive in Christ.

So how do we do the ministry that Christ has revealed to us in our lives? I think in the same way Paul writes about to the Ephesians. Trust that God has called you. Most of us say, “Why would God use me? What can I do? I’m not good enough.” I know because I used to think that way. I think we need to change that to, “Why not me?” Recognize your talents and abilities that will be your assets for ministry. If God has called me, who am I to question God’s decision? Be boundless and confident as a child of God.

I attended a performance of Beautiful: The Carole King Musical Friday night. In the opening scene the Carole turns to the audience and says something like: “This is not how I planned my life, it took a different path, it was surprising but surprises can be Beautiful.” It struck me as a wonderful example of epiphany. If we hone our gifts, God will use them, the Holy Spirit will make known to us how to use them.

Can we join Christ in his ministry? Can we set aside our fear, and maybe not be as fearless as Paul, but be open to discovering our part in God’s plan, be open to knowing that God truly is with us. We can join Christ in his ministry with boldness and confidence because of Christ’s faithfulness, we don’t have to rely on our own, Christ has us, we are his and he will always be faithful. This is what Paul understood, and what gave him confidence to tackle what God had placed on his life, with enthusiasm. Embrace the mystery knowing that Christ’s faithfulness is limitless.

So,

Learn from Paul's letter, search like the Magi, find God's epiphany for you, remembering that God is with us and in us. Dive in and be fearless. Amen.

Epiphany Stars Introduction

As we continue to be open to what God is doing here, we have an opportunity to discern where God is breaking into our lives in a simple, but powerful way. Epiphanies and stars are only God's to give, but today, we are passing out star words on Epiphany. These stars are a gift, an opportunity for you to look and be open to where God is breaking into your life, just as the wise men looked for God's breaking into the world by following the star and discovering Jesus.

During my first year in seminary I was introduced to the discipline of pondering where God was calling me through Epiphany star words. The confirmation class is coming around and passing baskets down each row. Please take a star – any star, don't try to find a particular word, the word you draw will pick you!

I invite you to consider how the word you pick might speak to your life in this New Year. Perhaps you could use it to lead your prayers this year. Perhaps you could tape your star to your refrigerator or bathroom mirror and when you see it, remember to be prepared for the Divine to be revealed to you, wherever your journey may take you.

Why would such a simple gift take on such deep meaning? What is it about receiving a word on a piece of paper that touches people? I think people are looking for tangible, clear signs of God's presence. We are good at being busy; this star word is an invitation to be still in the presence of God and receive God's gifts. We receive these gifts of star words before the offering because we offer our gifts in response to the grace God offers first. I look forward to hearing how God may be revealed to you this year!

Prayer

God, we acknowledge that we are not always ready to receive your best gifts for us. You have given us an epiphany word in order that we might be more. It is often our habit to turn aside, stumble over, or even reject experiences and encounters that we later understand to have been precious gifts.

Help us to be open to the gift that you offer us now through our star words. We acknowledge that we do not fully understand what this word might mean for our faith, but we receive it from you with gratitude and pray that your spirit will enable us to live into our word with intentionality and faithfulness. So, Learn from Paul's letter, search like the Magi, find God's epiphany for you, remembering that God is with us and in us. Dive in and be fearless. Amen.

**If you were not able to be in worship on January 7, and would like a star, contact me at kfinley@firstchurchlf.org*