

1-3-21 Remembrance, Communion, Epiphany

Sermon- Our Responsibility

Scripture- Ephesians 3:1-13, CTW PS 72:1-7

Hymns- 455, 65, 181

Theme- This is the week where many of us put away all of the trappings of the Christmas season, put the house back to normal, (whatever that is), and "get on with 'IT'," whatever that means! There is one thing that God does not want us to "put away", and today we talk about what **that** is!

I. Today is known as "Epiphany"

A. The definition of Epiphany is a Christian celebration on January 6th that remembers when the Wise Men first saw Jesus. Epiphany means when a god appears to someone. Therefore, in our context today, Paul is saying that now we have seen God through the birth of His son, a response on our part is being called for.

That is the "IT" we should not pack away until next year!

As believers in Jesus Christ, one thing we all struggle with from time to time is knowing God's will. In fact, as a pastor, it is probably one of the primary questions people ask. "How can I know God's will in this matter? How do I know for sure which direction I should take?"

Sometimes it is a timing issue. The individual understands what God's will is but doesn't seem to know whether or not it's the right time to move forward.

B. If God planned you before the world began and developed a plan for your life, do you think He would make it hard for you to find His will? Some people think that the will of God is like an invisible door you've got to find. And God is standing behind it, and when you walk past it God says, "Ha, ha, you missed it. Too bad for you." Fortunately that's not the way it works.

God brought me to a conclusion about this many years ago and this is what it comes down to: why would God want us to know His will and then turn around and make it so difficult for us to find?

My conclusion is this: He doesn't. His will for our lives is not as much a mystery as we make it out to be. In fact, we usually know exactly what He wants us to do, what our purpose is and when we need to move forward.

But the truth is, we don't really like the answer He Has given us. We don't appreciate the assignment He has given to us. So we keep asking, over and over, hoping for a different answer.

C. There is a prerequisite for knowing the will of God; and it's this - being willing to do it; faith and action. God does not say to you, "I'll show you my will and then I'd like you to decide if you'd like to do it. If it's OK with you."

God does not reveal His will so that you can speculate on it, so that you can think about it, or so you can ask all of your friends what they think and then take a vote on it. God reveals His will to people who are committed to do it no matter what it is.

We should understand that this letter Paul is writing is being written from a prison cell. This is one of at least 4 letters we know of Paul writes while in jail.

Each time he was imprisoned for preaching the gospel. But, still, he would always continue. He continued to preach and He continued to write, giving us roughly half of the books in the New Testament.

Now in this passage today Paul is explaining God's plan; God's will for each of us. And that is exactly what we need. We need to understand God's plan. The truth is God has a plan for us but most of us never follow it; most of us never even bother to ask the God of the universe; the One who formed us in our mother's womb, **what His plan for our lives actually is.**

II. Paul begins by telling us there is a mystery we need to understand. And He identifies Himself as a PRISONER. Verses

1-4. I have already said that Paul is a prisoner but we need to clarify that he is not saying he is a prisoner in the system.

He was in jail but he considers Himself a prisoner of the gospel. He has actually broken no law but is arrested for doing the same thing I stand here and do every week. He was a threat to the power group of the day and so he was arrested.

A. He then tells us that the mystery was made known to him by God's grace; through a revelation from God Himself. In other words, -God loves us and wants us to understand, so God spoke to Paul and Paul listened.

Now as simple as this is, we really need to understand that in order to know God's will, we must go to Him to find out what it is. Nothing wrong with talking to your pastor, talking to a friend who has some insight or reading some books.

But don't forget the most important principle here is that we go to the source.

If I want to learn about firetrucks I should go to the local fire department and ask some questions. If I want to learn how to speak another language the best thing to do is to go live in the country where that language is being spoken and immerse myself in it. Where I am completely surrounded by it.

So if I want to know God's will I need to go to the source — God himself. But that is often the last place we go. This message given to Paul was not given by a man, it came from God.

Another piece of information we need to understand is this: this word mystery as it is used here is not to be understood in the same way we use the word mystery. It doesn't mean it is something that is mysterious; it simply means something that has not been previously known. Like a secret that is suddenly open to the public.

B. Paul then tells us that the mystery was made known because God had a plan and the PLAN was to give us insight. "So that you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ." It was Paul's job to explain the plan; it is our job to follow it.

III. So in this passage today Paul is explaining God's plan; God's will for each of us. Truth is, God has a plan for us but most of us never follow it; most of us never even bother to ask the God of the universe what His plan for our lives actually is.

A. This is the very wisdom of God being revealed. Now why is that necessary? Very simple. Most of us don't have it. We make decisions every day without thinking and those decisions can hurt us in many ways. We miss God's best for us and we settle for something less.

So there are times when we need to be really simple about what we have to say and this is one of those times. If someone asks you what time it is, you don't stop and tell them how to build a clock. You just tell them the time.

There are times when we need to explain what we have before we explain how we got it. What does Paul have? Jesus. What else? A plan.

Now here is something all of us need to understand. You may feel like a prisoner right now. A prisoner of this virus; you can't go to the places you want to go; a prisoner in a dead-end job you want out of, you may feel like a prisoner of debt; you can't pay your bills, a prisoner of the expectations others have of you.

But as believers in Christ, even in the most difficult of situations, whatever you may feel you are a prisoner of, understand this: **God always has a PURPOSE.**

B. All of us, Jew and Gentile alike share in the PROMISE of Jesus Christ. Our PURPOSE can be fulfilled because of the PROMISE God made to His people. And only because of that PROMISE.

Christ was a Jew. The people God spoke to in the Old Testament were Jews. They are God's chosen people. Gentiles were considered as outsiders.

But God never intended for the gospel to be for Israel alone. So Paul explains in this passage that you and I are heirs together with Israel. **We are all members of the same body and we all**

share in the same promise. The salvation promised by God through His son is for all of us.

Paul explains here that he felt like he was the last person who should receive this revelation. This was Paul's humility. In one passage Paul calls himself the "chief of sinners."

If you're ranking sinners, Paul places himself at the top of the list. Here he says I am "less than the least." In other words, I'm not only at the bottom, I'm below that.

Paul could have written the song Amazing Grace because even though that is the position he is in, God showed this grace to him. And He has to all of us. This grace was shown to Paul so that he would find his PURPOSE.

And here it is: **Verse 8. To PREACH to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Jesus Christ. To the outsiders. To make this mystery, this previously unknown knowledge public.**

If any of us are ever given the privilege of preaching God's word, we must remember the fact that our greatness does not lie in ourselves. It is in the message. We are just ordinary people with an extraordinary message.

IV. Now we come to the PRIVILEGES of the mystery.

Verses 12-13. I want you to understand that before we can do what the Lord wants us to do for Him, we must understand what He has already done for us. The amazing privilege we have of knowing Him and carrying out His purpose for our lives.

Peter said He is the one in whom we have "everything pertaining to life and godliness." 2nd Peter 1:3.

And in light of our great privilege, Paul concludes here in **verse 13**, "I ask you not to lose heart; not to be discouraged over Paul's sufferings (and I would add, this speaks to us as well; don't be discouraged over your own sufferings).

A. Why? Paul tells us. Because they are all for your glory. Apparently many believers in that day grieved over the years Paul spent in prison and rightfully so. They grieved over the great suffering Paul went through. But Paul responds in Romans by saying this: "I consider that the sufferings

of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”

One day we will be with Jesus and nothing will be the same.

I have been doing some reading on some of the characters involved in World War II. In the time of Joseph Stalin, early in the 20th century, Stalin was General Secretary of the Communist Party in Russia. Did you know that in his early days he went to **seminary, planning to become a priest?**

Obviously his direction in life changed. During his time as President of the Communist Party 42,000 priests lost their lives. And the total number of priests in Russia went from 380,000 to 172. A thousand monasteries, 60 seminaries and 98 out of every 100 Orthodox churches were closed.

B. Obviously the message here is that somewhere along the way, Stalin put away (seemingly to forget it forever), the true message of Jesus.

A film has been made describing all of this called **Repentance**. In one scene in the movie, women living in a small village in Russia gathered in a muddy river to inspect logs as they floated down the river. They were trying to deal with Stalin’s oppression of his people.

What were they doing spending time on the riverbanks? They were hoping to find a message carved in one of the logs floating down the river from their husbands who were working in the prison camps cutting these logs.

They were desperate for a word from their loved ones to learn that they were still alive.

One woman found initials carved into the bark of the log; she began weeping loudly and hugging a log that contained her husbands carved initials.

This was probably the closest connection she would ever have to her husband.

The movie ends with the peasant woman asking someone on the street for directions to a church.

She is told she is on the wrong street. **She replies, what good is a street if it doesn't lead to a church?**

Our epiphany for today and for the coming year is **"What good is a path if it doesn't lead to our Savior Jesus?"**

What path are you on today? As you remember the events of this past year and come to the table He has prepared for you, **I pray you remember why you are here! Amen? Let Us Pray.**