

“Made Known”

As you know, the name of my previous congregation was Epiphany Lutheran Church, which comes from the Greek word *επιφανεω* (epiphaneō), a word that means *“to reveal, to make known.”* Since you already knew that, why repeat it? Because I have come to the realization that every congregation is established in its place to make known, not just to experience, but to make known, the love of Christ. We are to reveal to any and all that Christ is alive and active in this place, and that He desires to send His Spirit into the life of every person. So maybe our sign out front should read, “St. Thomas Lutheran Church — An Epiphany Congregation”

That word, epiphany, has come to be associated with an kind of an “Aha!” moment. It usually denotes a sudden (as my grandfather used to say) *“comes me a light on”* moment. But epiphany need not be a sudden occurrence. One can rather slowly, over time, evolve into an epiphany — a new way of knowing or experiencing something.

So — suddenly or slowly — we all have experienced epiphanies: your choice of career; or consequently, the dawning realization that this career you’re in is not the best use of your abilities; the peck on the cheek from the young woman (or young man) you had known only as a “good friend” who you now see as something much more interesting; the crossword puzzle you keep plugging away at, when you get that new insight that the clue is a pun so the answer must be, as well; that time that you were trying to figure out how to get that heavy object down to the basement and you realized, *“I need a strap to help me ease it down the steps.”*

I learned a new word while I was reading about the lessons for this day. That word is “irruption” — I suspect the scholar I was reading, Dirk G. Lange, Associate Professor of Worship at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, just recently came upon this word himself, since he used it several times in his commentary on today’s First Lesson.

The word means “to break in or burst in,” and Dr. Lange used it to describe what the prophet Isaiah was addressing in today’s First Lesson: *“The opening line of Isaiah 60 is like a thunderbolt of glory ... What surprises the reader or hearer is the abruptness of the shift from doom and gloom to light and glory. Perhaps what is most surprising in this shift is God’s response to the people’s crooked ways and their sense of despair: they are not to mend their ways first (out of fear) rather God comes, God irrupts, God arises and shines forth in glory!”*

I like learning new words, and this one particularly, because it focuses on something we are very much inclined to miss from this chapter in Isaiah. When we get to the lines ***“Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn,”*** and then ***“all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD,”*** our inclination is to go immediately to the Magi and the star that we see and hear about at Christmas.

But Isaiah is addressing something much closer to his own time and circumstances: Israel was in despair; the future was very uncertain; some of them had been sent back to the Promised Land, the rest were wondering if they would ever see it; those who were left in Babylon were jealous of those who had returned; those who had returned were contemptuous of those who had not.

The whole situation, to quote Dr. Lange, is *“characterized by gloom, by despair, by a call to repentance (the ways of the wicked are crooked, our transgressions are many, our sins testify against us). They are also marked by a yearning for light and glory to come (we wait for the light but there is only darkness).”* Then Boom! ***“Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.”*** Irruption!

God’s glory in the Hebrew scripture is always God’s presence. The glory of the Lord appears in the wilderness when the people complain about lacking food and God promises, and then sends, manna; when the Arc of the Covenant is completed, the glory of the Lord descends and fills it so that even Moses could not enter its chamber; when Moses asks to see

God's glory, God responds, "***You cannot see my face***"; it is the glory of the Lord that fills the sanctuary in Isaiah 6 (Holy! Holy! Holy! Kadosh in Hebrew — leads inexorably to Glory! Glory! Glory! Kabod). Throughout the Hebrew scriptures God's presence, God's very own face, is designated by glory. God does not possess glory — God is glory. And His glory is made known — Epiphany!

St. Paul, in today's Second Lesson, refers to all of this as a mystery. I read a totally unrelated article this week in which the author was bemoaning the fact that we Lutherans seem to have lost a sense of mystery, especially in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. His point was that we tend to intellectualize the faith, rather than to embrace it. The problem with that last sentence is that it reduces "faith" to a set of propositions about God, when faith must be a torrid relationship with God.

The mystery to which Paul refers is the mystery of the Incarnation — the scandalous notion (as he called it) that God would become one of us. That mystery comes with two questions: "How?" and "Why?" We attempt to answer the "how" with such phrases (from the Athanasian Creed) as "*God has taken humanity into himself; he does not transform deity into humanity.*" But all that tells us is we really don't know how to explain the "how."

The "why" we can answer quite forcefully: Because He loves us. This is the only explanation for why God would choose to become one of us — because in His love, He knew that we, enmeshed in our sin, had no chance of ever coming to Him.

Paul counts himself honored, because he has been entrusted with the message of this mystery: "***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.***"

Did you catch that? For generations, the mystery was not "epiphanied"

— made known. But now it has been “epiphanied” — made known. And what a revelation — God’s embrace is universal! It covers no select group, but all humanity! Paul recognizes that this places a responsibility on his shoulders: ***“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.”***

Pay special attention to that last part ***“through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known . . .”*** It is not just Paul’s responsibility, it is the church’s responsibility. Hmmmm . . . who could that mean today? You! It is through you that the mystery of God’s love is made known. Which, of course, means that it has been made known to you. That is not something you can think your way into understanding, you can only live into that faith mystery by opening yourself to God’s embrace.

We spend way too much time trying to come up with reasons why God could not possibly use us to make known this mystery. I don’t understand enough I don’t know enough I don’t speak well enough I wouldn’t know who to tell I would know how to tell Do you perceive the problem with all that? Who is most important is every one of those statements? “I” We need to develop a greater urgency for other pronouns.

First, we need a deeper sense of “we.” I ran across an almost 20-year-old issue of Theology Today this week, which had a poem, the last line of which struck me and stuck with me: *“Grace is slippery stuff when one walks alone.”* It’s true; apart from community we can devolve into very weird notions of what God and grace are like. We need to be in a robust community that shapes our thinking, speaking, and doing with regard to God. We need a community that can say, *“Hold on. Is that what the Scriptures teach? Is that how we are to understand? Is that what we’re called to do?”*

Then we need to develop a strong sense of “them.” Just saying that already tips the scale in a potentially bad direction. “Them” is a somewhat ostracizing notion, because it always dredges up the notion of “us versus them.” We need to realize that there are hundreds of people all around us who have no idea about God’s love, have never come close to experiencing the mystery, have no realization that they walk apart from God, and have no desire that they should walk with God.

We do tend to put them in the “them” category, as in “*Oh, them!*” when we should be asking ourselves how we bring them in to be “us.” One starting point (and it is just a starting point, not the whole deal): invite them!

Today’s Gospel is too familiar in some ways. We almost don’t listen to it because we’ve heard it so many times before — at Christmas (where it doesn’t belong) and at Epiphany. We conflate the Gospels into a unitary narrative, and in so doing, lose some of the unique witness each Evangelist builds into his narrative. So we have Wise Men with their camels standing at the manger alongside the shepherds and the sheep, oxen, and donkey.

One author recounted how, in his family, the figures of the Wise Men began to appear on Christmas in a window on the other side of the house from the manger scene. Each day they would be moved a tad closer, until the twelfth day, when they would be placed at the manger scene. Not totally accurate (by the time the Magi got there, the Holy Family was ensconced in a house), but it at least captures some of the mood.

What is the impact of this account from Matthew (the only one to recount it)? Pastor Craig A. Satterlee writes of the irony that “kings” from afar need to instruct the king of Judea about the arrival of the Messiah. But it goes much deeper than that, he writes: “*God seems to do whatever it takes to reach out to and embrace all people. God announces the birth of the Messiah to shepherds through angels on Christmas, to Magi via a star on Epiphany, and to the political and religious authorities of God’s own people in through visitors from the East. From a manger, where a*

child lies wrapped in bands of cloth, God's reach, God's embrace in Christ Jesus, gets bigger and bigger and bigger. Jesus eats with outcasts and sinners. Jesus touches people who are sick and people who live with disabilities. Jesus even calls the dead back to life. Ultimately, Jesus draws all people to himself as he is lifted up on the cross. In Christ Jesus, no one is beyond God's embrace."

We catch the universal grace Paul was talking about, made known in the person and ministry of Jesus. But then Pastor Satterlee wrote something that I think we should heed: *"The Magi did not come looking for the Christ through preaching, liturgy, sacrament, a welcoming congregation, or a vital social ministry — things I hold dear. They came seeking the Christ after studying the night skies. As someone who holds on to favorite, cherished ways that God works to proclaim the gospel and bring people to faith, it's always wondrously frightening to realize anew that God's own work of embracing all people is more 'mystery' than 'formula,' because God's ways are always bigger than my understanding."*

"God's own work of embracing all people is more 'mystery' than 'formula' . . ." It is not just the mystery of the Incarnation that we need to embrace, it is the mystery of how God embraces each person. Many of us came to the faith by a similar route: we were born into a family of believers, we were brought to the baptismal font at an early age, we were taught the message of the Scriptures, and had modeled for us examples of faithful living and proper churchmanship. Many of us have known nothing but the Christian faith. In Matthew's Gospel, we would be anyone in or near Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth. But wandering out in the deserts, the highways, the myriad pathways of the world are people who God wants to bring into His embrace — and how that will happen is a mystery in each and every case.

Except! We know this — it will happen when that person is brought into contact with the message of God's Word. It is not our task to accomplish the mystery; it is our task to make known God's Word whenever and

wherever we can (we could each use a little more of it ourselves).

So however it gets done, the mystery is made known. We get to be part of it; we get to share in it. God irrupts still into our world — through the likes of you and me. We, St Thomas Lutheran Church, who are an Epiphany congregation.

Amen.