

Sermon Ephesians 3 1 12 Epiphany Sunday Series A

Sermon: Epiphany Sunday

Text: Ephesians 3:1-12 (v.6)

Theme: The universality of the Gospel

Goal: Jesus came for all!

Dear Friends,

Introduction: Epiphany, - the Visit of the Wise Men to Jesus, - is also known as The Christmas of the Gentiles, because the Magi were not from the Jewish people, they came from Far East, and they are acknowledged as the first non-Jews to recognize that Jesus is the promised King. In some countries, especially in Spain, The Feast of the Three Kings is a grand celebration of the Church and has large popular manifestations. The children receive their gifts on 6<sup>th</sup> January, as if it was the Three Kings who brought them. Portugal and consequently Brazil have strong Three Kings traditions as well.

It is important for us to think about “The Christmas of the Gentiles” because it is relevant to us as well. We are non-Jews and we can say, the Wise Men from the East are like the forerunners of all non-Jews who came to faith in Christ and were made family of God. The Lutheran Hour Ministry, a worldwide radio program of the Lutheran Church, has as motto “*Bringing Christ to the Nations – and the Nations to the Church*” to emphasize the universality of the Gospel; and our Lutheran Church in Brazil has the motto “*Christ for All*”, just to highlight that the Gospel is not just for some specific race or denomination, but “*Christ is for All*”, in spite of the many social, cultural or racial differences existing between peoples.

I – The exclusivity of the Jews

The Apostle Paul had to work a lot on this new concept, because the Jews though they enjoyed an exclusive status in the Kingdom of God. If you had asked a Jew in the Biblical time: “*Who goes to heaven?*” he

would answer: *“Only we, the true descendants of Abraham.”* If someone from another race acknowledged the God of Israel, that person had to submit himself to all rituals and precepts of Judaism, even in matters like food and clothing. The Jews thought they were the only God’s chosen people.

Just a question for personal reflection: Do not some Lutherans have the same point of view as the ancient Jews? ...only traditional Lutherans go to heaven? – Those who think so will have a big surprise in heaven when they see people coming from the east and from the west and sitting at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

II – The mystery revealed

*Old Testament revelation, of course, spoke about the universality of the salvation blessings of the Lord. The Old Testament reading for today* (from Isaiah 60:1-6) *makes a point of that. Just how this was to be fulfilled, however, was not as clear in times past as it was in Paul’s day. His ministry to the Gentiles showed clearly God’s intention and plan, an aggressive effort to reach the uttermost parts of the earth with the Gospel news.* (Series C,40). Paul calls this process a “mystery ...which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit of God’s holy apostles and prophets.” And Paul reveals the mystery: “This mystery is that through the Gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and shares together in the promise of Christ Jesus.” Those who were excluded in the past are now co-heirs with the Jews of the same blessings, part of the same body, the body of Christ, and co-shares in the same promise. There are no differences anymore between people of different races and backgrounds when they all believe in Christ. And it is only by God’s grace through the Gospel, the message of the Good News brought by

Jesus, proclaimed by the angels at the first Christmas, and preached by the apostles.

As the wise men were guided by God following a shining star till they met Jesus, God still guides people from all around the world to follow the shining star of His Gospel to meet Jesus. The mystery of the Gospel cannot be hidden anymore, but must be proclaimed for the salvation of many.

### III – Through the church

We know that in the Old Testament time God spoke directly to several people. There was no written document, a Bible in the early time, before Moses. After some time, God gave the command to write His revelations, deeds and promises in a book, the Holy Scriptures. In the New Testament time, before the books were written, God spoke through angels and through His holy apostles. And during the Apostolic Time, God established His agency to promote His salvation plan and to reveal His gracious will written in the Bible. This agency of God is the church. Paul states in a very emphatic way the fundamental role of the church: “His (God) intent was that now, **through the church**, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known... to all in heaven and on earth... according to His eternal purpose which is accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.” God doesn't send angels anymore to proclaim His Gospel. We are God's angels, we are God's messengers – as we heard on Christmas Eve, to proclaim the revealed mystery of the love of God in Christ Jesus to all! Not just for those who are Christians or Lutherans, not just for those close to us or who have the same background that we, but for all, independent of their age, race, colour, language, social status or whatever. Therefore Epiphany and the visit of the Wise Men have such a great importance for the Christian Church as they opened the door for all non-Jews to enter the Kingdom of God, - like

all of us when we were baptized and were received by the grace of God into His kingdom by faith in Christ.

Conclusion: This new status of God's people gives us a special privilege. Paul writes: "In Him (in Jesus) and through faith in Him we may approach God with freedom and confidence." To approach God is a privilege of His children. Many are trying to approach God by their own efforts. They will never reach Him. God shows the way to approach Him through the Gospel preached by the church: only by faith in Jesus we can approach God and call Him as Our Father who art in heaven. And we can approach Him "with freedom and confidence", without fear, as dear children approach their dear father.

It's a pity that so many Christians and Lutherans miss this privilege of approaching our Father in heaven, leaving the church and following their own ways. Sorry that so many Christians, Lutherans and others are still searching for a way to approach God, instead of accepting God's way proposed by the Gospel: Just to believe in Christ! It is sad that many Christians are still not aware that the Gospel is for all, preserving the Gospel for themselves only. Sorry that the mission of God is not priority for many churches, while thousands of people are dying daily without having had the opportunity to listen to the Gospel and to come to faith in Jesus.

Let us approach God with freedom and confidence, asking for forgiveness for our lack of interest on God's mission to all. Let us approach God with freedom and confidence, looking for strength to proclaim the Gospel to all. Let us approach God with freedom and confidence in the fellowship of His people, hand by hand with all.

Amen.

Pastor Carlos Walter Winterle, Cape Town, 05 January 2014