

FOCUS: The Good News is God has made Himself known to all people through the Light of Christ.

Far be it from me to compare myself with Paul. I've never been imprisoned or persecuted. I was never struck blind and then had my sight restored by the laying on of hands and prayers from a stranger. I am a lousy tentmaker, too! However, as I read the second lesson for this morning, I found myself nodding along, saying to myself, "Yeah! That sounds like something I'd say!" Paul's passion for the Gospel and his mission comes through loud and clear in this letter to the Ephesians. Like Paul, I declare to you this morning, "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."

I'm not ashamed to say that I am a servant of the gospel—called to proclaim the Good News to all who will hear it and all who need to hear it and all who haven't yet heard it. It's not an easy task, to be sure. Not only is it difficult to prepare a new and, I hope, Spirit-filled message each week, but that message must be prepared while attending to all the other pastoral needs of the congregation, as well as the administrative requirements of ministry—reports, meetings, phone calls, and the like—as well as carving out time from the busy days and nights to spend time with my family and take care of myself. But, I am bold to declare that I am a servant of the gospel.

And, thanks be to God, Paul brought the Gospel to the Gentiles—folks like you and I who were not part of the Chosen People. As we hear in the sixth verse the reading from Ephesians, "the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise of Christ Jesus." The Gentiles heard the Good News, were baptized, and lived as children of the Light—children of God and coheirs with Christ. They didn't have to become Jews first, nor were they prohibited from responding to the gospel and being baptized. Paul wanted to make it very clear to the Ephesians—and to all of us—that we Gentiles were coheirs with all the promises of the Hebrew people. If we look at the Greek text, Paul uses the prefix *syn-*, which means "with" or "co-," on the words *-klēronomos* "heirs," *-sōma* "body," and *-metochos* "partners," translated as "sharers" in the NRSV. The inclusion of the Gentiles is no accident, and Gentiles are not considered "junior partners" or less deserving than their Jewish sisters and brothers.

God's plan of salvation includes both Jews and Gentiles. This was "hidden," so to speak, until the coming of the Christ Child and the manifestation, or *epiphany*, to the Magi from the East. In Paul's call to be a servant of the Gospel, the message was carried out to a larger audience within the Gentile community. The epiphany is part of the *mystery* of God's plan—known first only to God, and then revealed to the believers through Christ and then by the apostles, prophets, teachers, and preachers of the church who followed.

So then, if one is to be a "servant of the gospel" as Paul is, what then? What does it mean, and what might be the duties and responsibilities of such a servant? Are we to travel to foreign lands as missionaries, preaching the Gospel to those who have never heard it? This was the response of many, including the two young women imprisoned by the Taliban in Afghanistan. That is one option, but it is not necessarily the one to which we are called to fulfill. Perhaps, then, we are to go into the urban areas, proclaiming the gospel on the street corners with bullhorn in one hand and Bible in the other. Or, maybe we should travel door-to-door throughout the county, knocking on doors and inviting ourselves into homes of strangers in an effort to bring them into our midst. Maybe all of these are to be done. Maybe none of these are to be the answer. We're right back where we started then, asking ourselves, "OK. Now what?"

Our calling, dear sisters and brothers, as heirs, servants, and partners in the gospel, is, as Paul reminds us, to make the mystery of God's salvation known to all nations. We aren't called to keep the Light under a bushel, saving it all to ourselves or for a rainy day. Rather, we are called to make Christ known to the entire world. We can start right here in our little corner known as Beltsville. There are people all around us—at work, at school, in the stores, and so on—who have not heard about God's gift of salvation—the boundless gift of grace granted to us. We need to share the mystery with them. There are many ways to do that, of course. One of the easiest ways is to live the gospel in daily life. Care for the poor and needy, as we do in our ministry at Paint Branch Home, and invite a friend to join us. Contribute to the food pantry at McCormick Elementary, as we have been for the past month, and continue through the first Sunday in February, and invite a neighbor to contribute as well. Share a Bible story with a young person while playing a game on Games Night hosted by our Young Youth, and bring another family to come and see and play as well.

All of these activities, and a whole host of others, are ways in which we can make Christ known to others. Through our own actions, we let the Light of Christ shine through us and radiate to others. Just as the star over the stable in Bethlehem led the Magi to the cradle of the infant Jesus, so can we lead others to the foot of the Cross and, more importantly, to the empty tomb.

On Christmas Eve, we heard Luke describe how the dirty, conniving, less-than-charming shepherds were the first to hear of the birth of Jesus. In that memorable story, Luke described in great detail how the angels appeared to these lowly Jews and proclaimed to them the birth of the Savior. Luke describes how the “glory of the Lord shone around them,” and the heavenly hosts joined in one voice to declare “Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God’s people on earth!” On Christmas Eve, we heard the gospel message taken to the poorest on the margins of Jewish society. Emmanuel—God with us—was made known first to the lowest of the Chosen People.

But even so, those mangy shepherds were still a part of God’s Chosen People, and as such, they enjoyed the promise God made with Abraham. They didn’t *need* to have an epiphany, but God brought it to them anyway.

And today, we hear the story from Matthew about Christ being made know—being manifested—to these strange, wealthy, educated men from the East—a foreign place. And these weren’t simply Jews living in a faraway place. No, these men were Gentiles. They didn’t have the promise of God to Abraham, yet God revealed himself to these men in a distant land from the wealthy end of the social scale, but *not* of the Chosen People. The Magi *didn’t* have God’s promise. They *didn’t* have the Hebrew Scriptures as part of their tradition, and they *didn’t* expect the coming of a Messiah to be the Savior of the world. Yet, God chose to reveal the mystery to these strangers. And, because God did this, the door was opened for them—and you and I as well—to be children of God and coheirs with Christ. We, and all people, are members of the same body of Christ and partners in the promise offered to us in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

So, fellow servants of the gospel, we do know what it means to be such servants and what we are expected to do as such. Later this year, Matthew will provide us his account of the final post-Resurrection conversation between Jesus and his disciples. The Risen Christ will provide for us, the baptized children of God, our “job description” as servants of the gospel. But of course, you already know those duties. As servants of the gospel and children of God, we are called to go forth from this place into the world, proclaim the Good News of Christ Jesus, and make disciples of *all* nations—of *all* people, regardless of age or gender, nation of birth or social status, level of education or type of vocation—and to baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These are the duties of a servant of the gospel.

Paul shared with the Gentiles—the community at Ephesus as we heard today—that God’s grace was for each of them—Gentiles—as it was for him—a Jew. This is the Good News, dear friends—that God made Himself known to the world by coming to live with and among us. Born a humble child in a smelly stable, made known to and greeted first by lowly shepherds, and then by mighty foreigners. God with us lived and grew as a boy and as an adult, was made known to us and began his ministry with his baptism by John in the River Jordan, of which we will hear next Sunday. God with us was handed over to be executed on the Cross and then rose from the tomb for the forgiveness of *all* our sins. God’s grace, freely given and totally underserved, comes to us through this little Child who was worshipped and showered in gifts by wealthy, educated men from a foreign land on this 12th day after Christmas which we celebrate this morning.

The Magi brought boundless riches of man to the King of Kings, yet the Lord God’s gift of grace—the gift of the Son of God—far exceeds anything we might imagine or might deserve.