

Isaiah 60.1-6
Ephesians 3.1-12
Luke 2.15-21

The Epiphany of our Lord, 2006
St. James Lutheran Church
The Brogue, PA

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Long before Matthew and Luke wrote about Jesus' birth, Paul and his students had given a lot of thought to the meaning of Christ's appearing. That's the most important thing anyway, far more important than exact historical details like: when did the magi come, when did the shepherds come, where was the inn, who was there at the manger, etc. If the details are not in the forethoughts for Paul and his students, certainly the meaning of Christ's coming is, that is, in all their telling.

So the reading from Ephesians reflects a time in the church before Matthew and Luke even wrote, and we learn what Christ's coming means for them.

We learn from the reading in Ephesians that Christ's coming is a "mystery" (v. 3). Christ's coming is God's doing -- that's what "mystery" means. "Mystery" is something from beyond us, it's something hidden from human eyes, it is something conceived only by God and carried out by God, not by us. The mystery of the ages is now revealed: all peoples, the nations, Gentiles are now included in God's purposes, Gentiles have become fellow heirs of God's promises with all Israel through Christ.

Christ's coming was made evident to Paul. Of all people--destroyer of the church! He had his own very real epiphany *in the midst of* his persecuting--by "revelation" (v. 3), i.e., by other Christians talking about it (in private conversation and through preaching) and finally grasping what happened here (cf. 1 Cor 14:6, 26). His revelation, he takes pains to tell the Galatians, was not of human origin but by divine origin. The gospel proclaimed to him was not

from a human source, he did not confer with a human being; he received it, simply stated, through a revelation of Jesus Christ. This mystery, this revelation came from Christ himself, not from Paul himself.

“In former generations” (v. 5) this mystery was something unknown. Israel knew it would to be a light to all nations, despite their persecution and exile in Babylon. Israel knew the Messiah was to come through David’s lineage, but it was still to be manifested, it was still a mystery, that the coming of the Messiah and the message of his coming is for all peoples. With Christ’s appearing the Gentiles are included in the promises of God, not by their own achievement but by God’s favor of them through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In former generations this mystery was unheard of, not even conceived of, that reconciliation could take place between groups committed to being enemies, taking each other's territories and each other's lives. Instead now, “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Now a new age has dawned, has appeared, has been manifested in the appearance of Christ.

We learn what Christ’s coming meant for Paul. Christ’s coming had consequences. There is a new pattern now. Where there was once taking, now there was giving. It was God's doing, not ours, to bring the message of reconciliation in Christ to the world. That giving from God is now a model for us. That meant work needed to be done. After Easter it had started with the mission of (Christian) apostles and prophets to discern what this meant for relations with one another as church. They knew that the story of God’s people now has changed. They were given something new; a new vantage point, God’s vantage point. Not ours. Where there was death, now there is new life. Where there was once old creation, now new creation. Where there was destruction, there is now peace. Where there was no relationship, now there is new

relationship. Where there was enmity, there is now reconciliation. Where there is hurt and pain, now there is healing. Where there was no beginning, now there is new beginning. Where there was no message of good news, now there is sharing it to everyone you know. Where it was all about me and my self-interests, now it's about us and the for the sake of the church. Where there was taking, there was now giving.

How is this seen in the birth and Epiphany stories? Starting with Christ's birth, despised shepherds and suspect foreigners (i.e. the magi, who were Gentiles) are part of the story -- they all somehow know they've received a gift, so precious that they come to see what has happened in Bethlehem, and instead of taking they start giving. And this is the new understanding: God's giving has made them givers, so that others can experience the giving of God through them: the shepherds go tell others, the magi don't decide to go back to old Herod, where there was destruction in their path, but they return home *by another road* to their own countries to start the message of reconciliation and God's giving again. There's movement to and from the Christ-child -- the coming to see God's giving and the going back again to start giving, i.e. telling, i.e. proclaiming the message of reconciliation.

During World War II, the city of Coventry, England was bombed on November 14, 1940. The medieval Cathedral of Coventry was destroyed along with many parts of the city. In the days following the bombing, the Dean of Coventry called his people into the shell of the ruined cathedral and announced to them that this was the time to begin praying for the Germans. That would have been as hard a prayer for them as praying for Osama bin Laden would be for us after the September 11th bombings in New York and Washington.

Five years later on February 13, 1945, the city of Dresden, Germany, was firebombed resulting in deaths of nearly one hundred thirty eight thousand people, more than were lost in Britain during the entire second World War. Dresden was bombed in part as revenge for the

bombing of Coventry; the people of Coventry Cathedral were ready to work with the Germans in a program of reconciliation.

When the wall around East Germany came down in 1989, a week later the mayor of Dresden didn't know what to do. Peaceful crowds of 10,000 or more with candles were outside his office. While he called his troops to meet them at the square, he also called the pastors of Dresden to his office. The mayor was shaking in his boots in front of the pastors thinking the crowds wanted to all move in at once. A pastor asked, "Will the troops shoot?" The mayor said, "We have no bullets!" He was shaking in his boots because he was afraid he'd get lynched! Look at the mayor: All he wanted was self-preservation and no reconciliation. With counsel from the pastors, the crowds were called to meet in the four large churches of Dresden, where the pastors told them, "There are to be no acts of violence. There will be a natural transition here from one government to the next." And so it was.

The two cathedrals of Coventry and the Lutheran Church of our Lady (the [Jung]Frauenkirche / Church of the Virgin) in Dresden has now been rebuilt by donors from all over the world, esp. from America. The gold dome which was the last addition to beautify the church and city is from the queen of England. Both churches now represent to the world the reconciliation which has been made possible by Christ's coming.

What makes us feel better? Taking or giving? What gives us more satisfaction? Beating down and destroying the enemy, or building up? That's the mystery. And God called the shepherds to the manger. The angel appeared to them telling them of the Messiah's coming. God led the magi by a star. It wasn't their doing. And now we get to think about that.

Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.
Amen.