

Sermonette #1: God's plan is for all to know the truth of his love and mercy

First Lesson: **Isaiah 60:1-6**

So many people want to come to this country? All you have to do is go down to the strip on any given weekend and you will see any number of people from foreign countries taking pictures and enjoying the sights and sounds of Vegas. People are coming to this country both legally and illegally in huge numbers. But why do people want to come to this country so badly?

People often want to come to this country because they see hope in America. America offers something that they cannot find in their own country. They see opportunities for education and higher education, financial opportunities, opportunities for safety and security and to grow and do more than they might have been able to at home. They want these so badly that they are willing to make many sacrifices and take many risks to get them.

Isaiah speaks of people from many nations coming to see something that would give them hope and security. They come because something amazing is offered that they cannot get anywhere else.

¹ Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.

² See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you.

³ Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

⁴ "Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the arm.

⁵ Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come.

⁶ Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.

Unfortunately, the Jews did not think of a Messiah when they heard this prophecy. They thought Isaiah was talking about a time when they would again be a proud and great nation. They thought people would flock to them and praise them because of the greatness of their nation, not because of the greatness and love of their God.

The Old Testament Jews did not really reach out with the God's Word as we do today. It was not part of the main mission of the priests or the people to preach and teach to people outside the Jewish faith. The Jewish religion was temple-centric and Jewish-centric. The temple was like the sun, it was the center of the Jewish religion, and it would draw people to it, but only if they got close enough. If someone asked the Jews who the Messiah would take to heaven, they would not say people of all nations, they would say only the Jews would go to heaven.

Yet, here is Isaiah prophesying that there would come a time when there would be spiritual sons and daughters of the Lord from all nations, not just from the Jews. They would come to hear God's Good News in great numbers. There would be so many they would fill the land and the sea with their numbers.

These nations of people would praise God for his salvation with their hearts and minds and with their earthly gifts. They would give their gifts freely and joyfully thank him for his goodness.

At Epiphany, we see God reveal that his Messiah is for all nations. The doors of the spiritual temple are thrown open and people of all nations may come in. The Wise Men are the first of many Gentiles to praise and thank God for their salvation with their hearts, minds and earthly treasures. They praised God because his plan of salvation, revealed through Jesus, was, is and has always been for all people.

Sermonette # 2: God's Savior of the World is Revealed to the World

Lesson: Matthew 2: 1-14

The Eastern Christian Church historically celebrated Christmas on January 6th. To us this seems like an odd day to celebrate because we have always celebrated Christmas Day on December 25th. Still, there is a reason they did this. If you research or Google the phrase, *Was Jesus born on December 24, 25?* The answer is that he was probably not born on that date. We agree with that answer because the Bible does not tell us the exact date when Jesus was born. Then the question becomes, "Why do WE celebrate Christmas on December 25th?"

The answer to why December 25th is also not completely known. The best answer comes from the church fathers. The early Christian church was persecuted heavily by the Jews and the Romans. It got so bad, that they were not able to speak of their "church". Instead, they used a group of symbols and pictures as a secret language. This is where we get the fish symbol from. In a climate like this, would you be able to come together in a group and celebrate a religious festival without being noticed? Probably not.

What do you do then to celebrate the birth of the Savior? You use another festival that is already being celebrated as a mask to what you are really celebrating. December 25th was chosen by the members of that early church because it was during the Winter Solstice. Unbelievers were already getting together to celebrate the changing of seasons. It was a perfect cover for celebrating Jesus' birth.

When the persecution was over, the Western part of the church centered in Rome kept using December 25th as the day to celebrate the birth of Jesus. The Eastern part of the church, centered in Constantinople, wanted something that had more meaning. They chose to use January 6th, the coming of the Wise Men, also known as the revealing of Jesus, or the festival of Epiphany.

They chose this day because it was significant. Epiphany celebrates God's revelation of the Messiah to Gentiles. If the message of Jesus was kept just for the Jews, only they would be saved and we would not be among the nations that would come and praise God because we are included in God's plan of salvation.

Yet, with these 14 verses, God shows us his hand of blessing guiding these Gentile men to the very place where Jesus was so that they can praise Jesus with their own voices and gifts because he is not someone else's Savior, but he is their Savior.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ " 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.' "

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

This news that the Jesus is the Savior of the Nation is echoed and reechoed in the rest of Scripture. God has sent his Savior to the whole world. This account of the Magi is the first instance of the nations flocking to see Jesus just as Isaiah said they would, but it is would not be the last. People from every nation on the earth continue to come to their Savior, singing his praises and bringing their offerings of thanks to the Savior of the nations.

Sermonette # 3: God makes his plan known throughout the world

Lesson: Ephesians 3:2-12

The word Epiphany means to be revealed, or to have a revelation. God revealed this Savior through his prophets, through angels, and a star, but these are not the ways that God intended that the Gospel of Jesus would continue to be revealed and spread to the world.

God never intended that those who believed would act like an exclusive club where members had to have special requirements for entrance and then they would be able to hear the message. God intended that all people, people of all nations, would hear the Good News and be saved.

Yet, sometimes we turn our church and the Gospel into an exclusive club. We would never say that this person or that cannot be saved, but by our actions that is what we do. There are times we are not friendly with others because they do not speak, act or dress as we do, we want this message for ourselves because we think it is so important, yet we turn a blind eye when people, even those closest to us, need to hear the Law and the Gospel to lead them to repentance and to show them forgiveness, we make judgments about others based on their lives and actions and instead of lovingly leading them to their Savior, we figure that they would not listen anyway.

Paul speaks about a mystery that God has revealed to people: Jesus came into the world to save all people. This is not a mystery that is difficult to grasp, it is easy to think that God sent Jesus to save me, my family, or my congregation. We think of ourselves as souls that need saving and we thank him, but do we think of those others as souls that need to be saved as well? Can and do we extend that grace of God to those who do not look like us, act like us or live like us? Can and do we extend that grace to those who have not heard of their Savior and because of that, live outwardly sinful lives that we deem too far gone for salvation? Can we and do we extend God's grace to all people of the world as God does?

² Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. ⁴ In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. ⁶ This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

⁷ I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. ⁸ Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. ¹⁰ His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, ¹¹ according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. ¹² In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.

Paul poses a fairly simple question to us many times in his letters: How will the nations who are supposed to be flocking to praise this Savior, hear the news that Jesus has come to save them? How will those who do not know who Jesus is and what he has done, have this mystery revealed to them?

Some people like mysteries. The best mystery is the one that you can't tell where it's going until the very end. Then, there is that aha moment when the mystery is revealed and you understand and it all comes together. Imagine a story or a movie that never had that aha moment, that explanation, and it just ended, the credits rolled without any explanation. We wouldn't like that ending very much.

There are people are wandering around looking for the answers to the mystery of what life is all about. They are looking for an explanation for life or for hope and comfort, but they never find it. They walk around with the question mark over their heads but no one takes the time to help them find the answer to their question.

Paul's point is that all who are joined together in God's love and mercy are that aha moment for people, we are the bearers of God's message and sharers of that message. Just as Paul did for the Jews and the Gentiles of his day, so we are to do with the many multitudes of people who we come into contact with today who have not heard and do not believe. We are the explainers of the mystery, the sharers of the Good News of Jesus love and forgiveness.

My dear Christian friends, God intends Epiphany, his revealing, is done through us today and every day. We are the ones who are to share this wonderful message with the nations, those people who are in our life, that they may flock to the Lord praising him for his goodness through Jesus with us. May God give the strength, the willingness and the words to share the news of our Savior Jesus with many others that they too may come to him to praise him for the salvation which is ours through him. Amen.