

“Mystery Revealed”

Ephesians 3:1-13

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Hope for the Future

We've had a big week in terms of pandemic news. I'm certain that by now you've all heard the CDC's revised guidance and Governor Cooper's announcement that most of the mask mandates are being lifted for fully-vaccinated folks. For some of you, that's welcome news; for others, it's frightening news. If you can imagine an emotion, there's probably somebody in our church family who is feeling it right now. I felt most of them this week. I felt a little anxious, a little excited, a little nervous, a little relieved, and more than a little confused that I was having so many emotions about masks! What I am feeling most deeply, however, is hope. Hope that at some point before too long, I can do all the things that I have delayed for so long. Things like visiting family, taking teams on mission trips, going anywhere without making an extra trip back inside because I forgot to grab a mask. I'm also really looking forward to working with our kids here at Corinth again. We have an unusual number of unusually awesome kids around here, and I have missed them!

Pre-pandemic, one of the things that I really enjoyed doing was teaching the Bible to our preschoolers and elementary schoolers. I loved giving children's messages with a dozen or more 3- and 4-year-olds gathered around me on the chancel steps, or teaching the week's lesson to our K-5th graders in Big City Studio. The thing that I most love about those roles is the unpredictability of trying to have a meaningful conversation with young children. Some days, it all clicks and everything goes perfectly. More often than not, something goes horribly, weirdly, and sometimes hysterically wrong.

When I think back to my weeks teaching in Big City Studio with our K-5th graders, I remember how often my plans were derailed. After teaching a lesson about the birth of Jesus, for example, I might ask the kids to repeat back key facts, like that Jesus' mom's name was Mary, or that he was born in a stable, or that the name of the town was Bethlehem. As I'd take the microphone around to the kids, I'd ask a question like, "Does anybody remember Jesus' mom's name?"

The first kid might answer, "My mom made cookies yesterday, but we didn't use nuts, because my brother is allergic." I might give some response, but I'd move on to the next kid quickly. "Did they have cookies when Jesus was born?" that child might ask.

"I don't know," I'd answer. "Jesus' mom's name was Mary. Does anybody know where he was born?" My efforts were toward gently but firmly redirecting the group. "I have a friend named Mary," another kid might add. "She's not a nice friend. She pushed me."

I'm not the best K-5 teacher around, but I'm also pretty sure that I'm not the worst. Sometimes, my message gets through loud and clear, and I know they got it. But other days, I can't so sure. Kids have this amazing ability to become fixated on their own thing, and they refuse to be rerouted to my topic until they've worked out whatever the thing is that they want to talk about. Before I know it, a conversation that starts out moving in one predictable, planned, productive direction suddenly derails and turns into something very different. It's weird. It's beautiful. It's kind of scary sometimes. I've missed it like crazy. And it reminds me an awful lot of how the Apostle Paul is writing in today's passage.

I Digress...

Chapter 3 opens with what appears to be a meaningful and logical connection to the passage we studied last week, Ephesians 2:11-22. In that passage, Paul paints a beautiful picture of the church as a place that is united but diverse. He outlines God's plan for Jews and Gentiles to be joined together into one new creation, where there are no divisions or hierarchies based on their nationality, ethnicity, or race.

Right on the heels of that, Paul says "For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles — " (1). And that's it. The thought he begins in verse 1, he immediately loses in verse 2 and does not find it again until verse 14. What we have this week is Paul interrupting himself and making a hard left turn into some unexpected territory. It's an unusual passage set in a literary form known as a *digressio*. But I think it's better understood by the English term from the same root: digression.

What I think happened in this passage is that Paul stepped away from writing the letter for a little while mid-thought. If you jump over verses 2-13, the rest of chapter 3 forms an eloquent, logical follow-up to chapter 2. I believe Paul started that follow up, and then something (we can't possibly know what) distracted him. When he came back to the letter, a new thought had seized his mind and his heart. He was overcome with the magnitude of God's grace, humbled by the realization that God was using him, and in awe of the glory of God's plan for redemption.

Paul and His Revelation (3:1-6)

Our best guess is that Paul is a prisoner of Rome when he writes this letter. It's been 5-7 years since he was in the city of Ephesus, and it seems likely that he was in prison for much of that time. When he talks about being a "prisoner of Christ Jesus" (1) and "suffering" (13), we have every reason to believe that he is talking literally about being a prisoner because of his ministry and suffering for that reason. We learn in the later chapters of Acts that Paul was falsely accused of taking a Gentile into the Temple to an area where only Jews were allowed to go. There's no evidence he ever actually did that. That false charge served only to get him away from the work he actually was doing — preaching Jesus to Jews and Gentiles alike.

Paul begins his digression with a phrase translated "Surely you have heard...." (2) This points to the fact that most of his audience is made up of new believers who didn't meet

him personally while he was in Ephesus. It's been a while since he was there and the church has grown. He's saying to them that he knows they are aware of him, his role in God's plan (2), and the mystery of God (3). Paul waits until verse 6 to say it clearly, but by that point, it's abundantly clear that the mystery Paul has in mind is what he wrote about in Ephesians 2:11-22. The mystery is that God has a new way to arrange people, where there are no hierarchies and all are united in a diversity of equals.

But before he explains this mystery, Paul writes what I consider the most problematic section of this passage. "In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets." (vs. 4-5) At first reading, this sounded terribly self-centered and borderline relativistic to me. Does this mean that Paul figured out something about Jesus that nobody else ever had access to? What makes Paul so special? And who is he to tell me what God's up to?

The first issue is one of authority. For centuries, it was assumed that the church leaders had access to God and to true knowledge and that it was the leaders' job to translate that insight into manageable lessons for their people. A big part of the Protestant Reformation was changing that mindset; the people had and should use their direct access to God. Today we have a different problem altogether. Now, there's a widespread idea that "my truth," whatever that might be, is as valid as any other kind of truth. In both scenarios, there's a certain secrecy about what God is doing.

Is Paul trying to mediate God's revelation to the people? Is Paul saying that this revelation was given only to him alone? No. When Paul says the mystery was revealed to him by God, he's saying that this reality is so unimaginable and unfathomable that only the direct revelation from God himself could make it believable. In a sense, he's saying that it is impossible that he invented this mystery. And Paul clearly doesn't think he's the only one to receive it. He says that the mystery has been revealed to a whole host of God's people, the "holy apostles and prophets." (5)

My other challenge in these verses was the idea of the mystery that was previously hidden and is now revealed. In the ancient world, there were all kinds of cults that were centered around secret knowledge and practices that were only known by initiates. Even though this passage borrows a lot of that sort of language, Paul is not suggesting that Christianity is built on secrets. Rather, this is more like a mystery. Think of it like a Hardy Boys or Nancy Drew book. In a good mystery, there are clues along the way that point toward the truth. Each clue by itself isn't enough to solve the mystery, but each is significant to the ultimate solution. Eventually there is a moment where the last clue is found, and with that clue, all the others fall into place and make sense. At that point the investigator can look back and see that great significance and importance of even the smallest, most insignificant-seeming clue. That's what Paul is talking about.

This mystery that has been revealed, Paul tells us in verse 6, is that God has designed for his people to be a church that is marked by radical unity in diversity. Paul is falling all over himself to make it clear that the Jews and Gentiles are equals and are both part of

God's design. He stacks up these compound Greek words: heirs together, members together, sharers together. (6) In other parts of the Bible, we get a more detailed account of Paul's background than we do in Ephesians. We learn that he was incredibly well-versed in the Jewish scriptures, our Old Testament. Paul would certainly have known that there were many clues pointing toward God's redemption and restoration and the hope of a coming Messiah. He would have had a lot of the pieces before him for his whole life. But that whole time, he was missing a crucial piece.

It's not until he encounters Jesus on the road to Damascus that he gets the final clue. And with that last clue - with the knowledge of Jesus - the mystery is solved. With Jesus, he can look back and see all the signs of how God was going to save and restore the world. Without Jesus, nobody would have been able to conceive of this plan to bring together the previously hostile factions of Jews and Gentiles. God wasn't hiding the plan from some people and revealing it to others. God's revelation through Jesus was very big and very public. The mystery had been hidden in the past simply because the last clue to the mystery had not yet come along. Now all the clues fall into place, and it gets Paul so excited about what God is doing that he interrupts himself and launches down this digression!

Paul and the Church (3:7-13)

In the second half of this digression (7-13), Paul reiterates several of the same themes from the first half including God's grace and the hidden mystery now revealed. He also adds an interesting description of himself (8), a clear statement of his purpose (8-9), the church's purpose (10-11), and some reassurances for us (12) and the Ephesians (13).

Paul takes great pains to be sure that nobody thinks his role in God's plan has anything to do with Paul's own intrinsic worthiness. Paul uses phrases like "servant of this gospel" (7) and emphasizes that his servanthood is a gift given to him by God's power. He uses a lot of passive words to make it clear that he wasn't the primary agent of change in his own life. And in verse 8, he does a really odd thing and basically makes up a new word that translators have rendered "less than the least" or some similar phrasings. One writer suggested that if we had to translate it precisely, the result would be a verse 8 that said something like "I am the leaster of all the Lord's people." It's obviously very important to Paul that all his readers know just how "leaster" he is!

Paul wastes no time moving on to a clear statement of his status. God gave him the gift of having a visible role in the church, and Paul's role was to use that gift to "preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone... the mystery." (8-9) Paul didn't invent the message. He didn't craft for himself the role of apostle. He received the gift of God's grace, and accepted his commission to preach and to make plain what God was doing in the world.

And just as clear as he is on his own purpose, Paul is equally clear on the church's purpose. The church's job is to display the manifold wisdom of God. Paul puts a lot of other phrases around it, and there are all sorts of scholarly debates about who or what the "rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms" are. But I don't think that's all that

important. What matters is that the job of the church is to be a bold, clear display of God's wisdom. In this case, Paul specifically means as God's wisdom in being the uniting force that brings together people of all races to create a brand new reality.

Finally, Paul reminds the believers that there are no barriers to approaching God. This actually sets up very nicely the prayer that he will launch into in verse 14 – but that's next week's passage! For now, Paul just lines up three words about connection; the first means boldness, the second means access or an open door, and the third means confidence. In our modern Protestant American view, there's nothing remarkable about this. As Americans, the freedom of speech is one that we tend to value highly; it's deeply ingrained in us that we may speak freely. This was a less common assumption in the ancient world. In a democratic society, all men would have had the privilege of speaking openly at public gatherings. But the notion of speaking freely to a deity was very unusual. Paul uses words that were more often connected with friendship than with worship. He is giving the church assurance that they can approach God as a friend, speaking to him honestly, openly, vulnerably, in their prayers.

And at last, after an 11-verse digression, Paul returns his focus to the Ephesians. He does so in a decidedly pastoral manner. Remember that Paul is in prison. By normal social conventions, this should be a point of shame and embarrassment. The Ephesian church's founder is a disgraced prisoner of Rome. It would be reasonable for them to distance themselves from him, and to question his authority as an apostle, the value of his teachings, and their own identity as his followers. Yet Paul does what the Bible so often does, and turns that upside. My imprisonment, he tells them, is not a reason for you to be discouraged or ashamed. My suffering is your glory. Why? Because when God interrupts our lives, things get turned upside down, and we learn new ways to interpret what we thought we once thought we understood.

Take the Detour

Even if we can follow and understand Paul's digression, one valuable question remains: What can we learn from a 2000-year-old digression that would still matter today?

It's okay to digress. Many of us put a lot of stock in our ability to be dignified people in polite society. And the majority of the time, that's not a bad thing. I would not be able to do my job if I couldn't listen without overreacting, give dedicated attention to the person or task at hand, represent the church respectably in public settings, and generally go about my days with a lot of self-control and self-discipline. Those are all useful skills that lead to good outcomes. But not all the time. There is absolutely the time and the place to be so overcome by the magnitude of God's goodness and mercy and the infinite wisdom of his plans that we can't not stop and marvel at it!

There are times, to borrow some words from King David, where we should become "even more undignified." (2 Sam 6:22) Perhaps the messages you need to hear today is that it's time to let go of whatever notions you have about what is proper and orderly and just bask in God's marvelous mystery. Celebrate like a child. Kids know far better than we grown-ups do how to recognize when they're feeling excited, and they're far

more responsive to those feelings than most grown-ups. Don't try to regulate the feeling or schedule the encounter. When you see or hear or feel the goodness and grace of God, take that detour. It's okay to digress from whatever you had planned.

It's not about me. A lot of this passage is autobiographical in nature, so it may seem strange to now hear that it's not personal. Keep in mind that even Paul's autobiography isn't really about him. When Paul talks about his role, he speaks of it as a component of God's plan. When Paul talks about himself, it's really a tool to tell of God's grace. Like Paul, we can and should find opportunities to share our stories of what God is doing in and through us. But when we do, we must be careful in how we tell those stories. Our testimonies are never meant to shine a light on how amazing we are now or how miserable we were before. Our testimonies, like Paul's, should emphasize the fact that our stories are not about us. They are defined and shaped and given meaning only through Jesus.

Our job is temporary. In this passage, Paul situates himself firmly between the many generations who have come before him (5), and the eternal nature of God's plan (11). Somewhere in between an ancient past and an eternal future, there's Paul, and there's us. We are one small dot in an ages-long story. I don't mean to say that our lives, our struggles, our callings are unimportant. Quite the opposite. I think God cares deeply about the details of each of our lives. But our job is a temporary one. As the church, we are stewards of a message we didn't invent and an identity we don't own. One day, you and I will all be distant memories of the generations who follow us. To be the church faithfully means striving to be a more and more accurate reflection of God's heart and design, so that we might make known the "manifold wisdom of God" (10). And then, we pass that on to the next generation, so they can continue our legacy.

So often we work too hard to solve a mystery that's already been revealed. We have Jesus. All the clues are in place. We know that God's up to something huge in the world. Despite ourselves, we get to be a part of that for whatever time we have on this earth. So let's have some fun with it. My encouragement for you today is to take a detour and celebrate the grace of God given to us in Christ. Release the burden of having to be perfect or figure it all out. God chose you, and it's a good thing to celebrate that. God's grace is more than sufficient and his power is more than enough. His divine mystery is still worthy of awe and wonder. Take a moment, a day, a season... and encounter all those truths like a child. It's okay to get swept away and wind up where you never expected to go. Take a godly digression.