

## THE HINDRANCE OF ANTIQUATED FEASTS

Our sermon for the Feast of the Appearance of Our Lord is taken primarily from St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, chapter 3. Hear again the Word of the Lord:

*The Gentiles (are) fellow-heirs, and fellow-members of the Body, and fellow-partakers of the Promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.<sup>1</sup>*

**Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**

Today is one of the five great High Feasts of the ancient New Testament Church. It is the second Feast in our calendar. In our era, except for "throwback," or "old-school" congregations like Catalina, this Feast is seen as movable, if it is observed at all. We maintain the helpful tradition of keeping the Epiphany Feast on the appointed day, January 6, for several reasons, the foremost of which is its public declaration of the long-hidden mystery of God. Namely, that is that those who were not born of Jewish mothers are still included in the Promise to Abraham which comes to its fulfillment in the New Testament Church. St. Paul declares,

*that Gentiles (are) fellow-heirs, and fellow-members of the Body, and fellow-partakers of the Promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.<sup>2</sup>*

Epiphany is kept on this day of the year because it celebrates the appearance of God in our flesh, not just to angels, a Jewish mother and step-father, or lowly shepherds, but to non-Israelites, men of wealth and wisdom. Today, again, *even the*

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 3:6.

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 3:6.

*angels in heaven are having God's wisdom made known to them* (Lenski, p. 484), as St. Paul

declares:

*now (the mystery) might be made known to the ruling ones and authorities in the heavenly (places) through the Church the many-sided wisdom of God...<sup>3</sup>*

The mystery of Epiphany is that God, in His eternal wisdom has chosen in Christ Jesus to make you all into one in His household. The mystery is how He has done this, namely, through the Faith of the Christ - Jesus, our Lord, Son of Mary and Son of God through miraculous incarnation, conception, and birth. That is news of great joy, not just for the ancients, not just for us, but for all the heavenly beings - angels, cherubim, seraphim - and all the holy men and women who waited in the Faith for millennia for the coming of the Christ in our flesh.

The Feast of the Epiphany is kept, because in a genuine way, it is another celebration of the Light of Life which has come into the World, now shining upon the Gentiles. One could go from the candlelight Christmas Eve service to the Lights of the Epiphany Eve services and rejoice in God's incarnation and appearance for sinners. For centuries, until, it appears, January 1970, the Epiphany Feast was kept on January 6 in congregations of the Western Rite. It was, until that year, a day of obligation, wherein the faithful, every January 6 on whatever day it fell, were to be hearing the Word and receiving the Body and Blood of Jesus. Forty-one years ago, the Roman Church, the ancient holder of the Western tradition, caved to secular pressure in the

United States. It only took them some 1800 years to change the Feast to dates more practical! From 1970, the Epiphany can be found celebrated in our local Roman parishes anywhere between January 2 and January 8 (so much for the Twelve Days of Christmas)! We Lutherans hung on longer to the January 6 Feast date. But, those who are more “progressive” in our confession of the Faith have gone the way of the US Roman Catholic Church (and perhaps should be honest, and go all the way! After all, if the focus of a congregation’s services is to move the people to good works and words as living the Christian life, without the “hindrance” of “antiquated” feasts, then, why not join the confession of faith that teaches a lot about good works all the way toward earning one’s salvation?) What does St. Paul say to that?

*Gentiles (are) fellow-heirs, and fellow-members of the Body, and fellow-partakers of the Promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.*<sup>4</sup>

If you are a Christian, you are so because of God’s grace in *the Promise in Christ Jesus – through the Gospel*. St. Paul makes no mention of your works, your thoughts, your preparations, your decisions, with regard to obtaining your salvation into the Body of Christ. Yes, there are words elsewhere where God through St. Paul calls Christians to good works, but even there he indicates they were prepared by God for us to do *beforehand that we should walk in them*.<sup>5</sup>

St. Paul, this Epiphany Feast, is focusing you on the Light of Christ, His Good Work for you. He is calling you to the revelation, the unveiling of the ancient

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<sup>3</sup> *Ephesians* 3:10.

mystery, that is none other than the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That Good News is the eternal reality that, to save you, and all humans, Jew and Gentile alike, God took on human flesh, was born of the Virgin Mary, lived the perfect life in your stead, and died in your sins that you will not have to die in them! St. Paul declares:

*according to revelation, the mystery was made known to me (just as I wrote before in brief); as to which all of you continue to have power, reading this, to understand my knowledge in the mystery of the Christ...<sup>6</sup>*

The mystery revealed is the Good News proclaimed that Jesus is the chief cornerstone of the household of the Faith. For those not born of ancient Israel, this became a reality in time when Jesus came into the world, and received the gifts of the wise men. He was given gold – which would be soon needed to fund His and His human family’s flight into Egypt against an untimely death. He was given frankincense and myrrh, costly spices, gifts fit for a king, and to fit a king for burial. The reported fact that the gift-bearing Magi prostrated themselves before the infant Lord of Lords, that they worshipped, means that they who had seen the sign, had also heard the Word of God which led them into the Faith.

Think about this: those Magi were of a select group of men, we might call them astronomers/astrologers who were trained to read the stars for signs of great import. They expected kings and leaders of peoples births to be accompanied by signs in the heavens. They saw the leading star. Somewhere they had heard it portended

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<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 3:6.

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 2:10b.

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 3:3-4.

the birth of the King of the Jews. He is, after all, the One for whom they inquired of King Herod. And, when asked, the King of Judea asked the religious leaders of the Jews for the Word of God regarding the King for whom the Magi inquired after. And they, with Herod, heard the Promise. Having heard the Word of the Promise, having found the King of Kings in our flesh, in a home in Bethlehem, they worshipped Him, not simply as a King, but as God!

The mystery of the Promise given to the Jews, the mystery the Magi sought, was revealed to them by the Word of God, and shown to them in their eyes. So, too, in a real way, it is for you this evening. The mystery of God has been declared – you are in the household of God, recipients of the Good News of *untraceable riches of the Christ*.<sup>7</sup>

In the Nativity of our Lord, the Light of Light shined upon the Jews. In the Epiphany of our Lord, the Light of Light shined upon Jews and Gentiles. All who hold to the Faith of Christ, from that time forward, are given a special gift. That is, they, *you, continue to have the boldness and entrance by confidence through the Faith of (Jesus)*.<sup>8</sup> In our era of practical Christianity, that last part is glossed over. It appears that confessional Lutherans began to learn to focus more on “our faith,” and, “my faith,” rather than, “the Faith of Jesus,” through teaching that crept into the Church just after Hitler invaded Poland, the same year the first Social Security claims were paid in the

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<sup>7</sup> *Ephesians* 3:8b.

<sup>8</sup> *Ephesians* 3:12.

United States. From a 1937 change in teaching, came translations which no longer stated, *through the Faith of Him*, (a literal translation, preserved in the *King James Version*) and began to translate, *through our faith in Him*.<sup>9</sup> There is an eternity of difference between counting on the Faith of Jesus for your access to God, and trusting in your faith, or, our faith, for your boldness in access to the Father!

Oh, the power you have in the Faith of Jesus. St. Paul declares:

*All of you continue to have power, reading this, to perceive by my insight in(to) the mystery of the Christ, which to different generations was not made known to the sons of men as now it has been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets by (the) Spirit, which is that the Gentiles (are) fellow-heirs, and fellow-members of the Body, and fellow-partakers of the Promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.*<sup>10</sup>

Jesus, to Whom the Gentile's gifts were once given, has given His all – for you. He, to Whom the Magi prayed, intercedes with the Father – for you. He, Who led Gentiles to Himself by the Light of the guiding star, is the Light of Life – for you. He, Who once appeared in an infant's flesh, continues to appear as the revelation of the Mystery of the ages – for you. A blessed Epiphany to you who are one in the Promise revealed.

**The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus**

**The Epiphany of our Lord** (*LSB One Year Series*)

Psalm 24; Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

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*Paster Michael A. Morehouse*

**SOLI DEO GLORIA**

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<sup>9</sup> *The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version*, 1946. Ephesians 3:12b.

<sup>10</sup> *Ephesians* 3:4-6.