

“The Mystery Revealed”
Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12
Sunday, January 6, 2019
Rev. David Hutchinson

The writer - - Robert Louis Stevenson - - once described a time when he was a boy watching a lamplighter. / A lamplighter - - was the person who used to go around the streets lighting the lamps at sunset - - back before electric lights and timers.

He watched the lamplighter from his window.

As he watched out the window - - his nanny came in to check on him.

She asked him: “What are you doing? / What are you watching out there?”

He said: “I’m watching a man - - poke holes in the darkness.”

As I read the scripture reading from Ephesians - - that phrase rings true for me.

Ephesians talks about a MYSTERY.

Paul writes about it as - - the mystery HIDDEN in God.

Some translations or versions of the text say - - hidden BY God.

Either way - - the mystery is - - revealed - - in Jesus Christ.

And the mystery IS that - - salvation is available to EVERYONE.

And everyone in the case of Paul means - - even the Gentiles.

BUT - - that mystery - - was HIDDEN in the past.

NOW - - Paul says - - it is revealed.

For centuries people were - - in the dark - - when it came to understanding how God would bring hope - - and healing - - and salvation to the WHOLE world.

It was a mystery.

There WAS a covenant - - with the people of Israel.

But Israel was only a small group - - compared to the world!

After Israel - - what then - - was the question?

Some people may have thought that was all there was to the covenant.

But the central mystery of Jesus Christ is in the ALL that follows.

The central mystery of Jesus is NOT salvation.

It is that salvation - - is for ALL - - for everyone.

To understand the POWER of that claim - - look back at the prophet Isaiah.

In Isaiah - - chapter 60 - - we read, “Arise, shine, for you light has come”. This reading is from chapter 60 as I said. / That is near the END of the book of Isaiah. / It was written several HUNDRED years AFTER those INITIAL prophecies about the coming of “Emmanuel” that we read at Christmas.

During Advent in December - - every year we read the prophecies from Isaiah - - chapters 7, 9 and 11. / They tell of the coming messiah as a “shoot” named “Emmanuel”.

These initial prophecies were from 700 years before Jesus.

But early followers of Jesus saw him as the answer to these ancient expectations.

They were written way back in history.

From BEFORE Israel went into exile.

Way back then there was an expectation of a “Prince of Peace”.

Some people thought King Hezekiah would fill the bill.

But he didn’t quite do it.

And - - Israel went INTO exile.

THEN - - in chapter 60 - - 200 years later - - Israel had begun to RETURN from exile.

And centuries later - - the prophecies continue.

Centuries later - - another prophet named Isaiah - - maybe a grandson - - is still at it.

There is still this hope - - this mystery.

Isaiah says, “Arise, shine, your light has come - - YOU will BE a LIGHT to the nations.”

You will be a light to the world.

Isaiah says, “You - - Israel - - you will light the way for the world.”

Show the world what it means to live in peace.

But of course - - even then - - the peace was limited.

And so - - the hope was prolonged again.

But this was the hope - - that lighted the way - - for the gospel - - and the STAR - - and the WISE MEN - - described in Matthew.

David Keck is a chaplain at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Florida.

He has written about the Wise Men in the Christmas story - - and outer space.

You can read the whole thing in the *Christian Century* magazine.

He writes this:

“The wise men - - may well have been astronomers - - or some other form of stargazer.

The Christian tradition made kings of these men.” But of course it doesn’t say KINGS in Matthew. / Matthew says that they were “from the East”.

“There is - - in this text - - an extraordinary hope: the peoples of the earth coming together - - united in their recognition of what’s important. / Space exploration - - remains a symbol of a better future - - with the possibilities of Mars rovers.”

“Those wise men followed a star in the sky - - and now that humanity has gotten into the sky - - we dream of going beyond the atmosphere.

The first person in space - - Yuri Gagarin is said to have declared:

He went up there - - and didn't see God.

For good Soviets in the communist years - - astronomy and space exploration were part of the larger propaganda effort. / Stargazing and space exploration involve politics and religion. AND - - when King Herod heard of the arrival of the wise men in Jerusalem - - he understood that the stakes were high.”

“The manifestation of God - - to Gentile nations - - represented by the Magi - - IS something to celebrate - - BUT - - the story of following a SIGN - - a star - - also LEADS - - to the powers and principalities - - and that - - should NOT be surprising. / Because the BABY - - will ALSO be - - the SACRIFICE that was BROKEN - - and that sinful humanity desperately needs.”

It turns out that being the light of the world - - has its challenges.

BUT - - it is something we are all expected to do!

Jesus - - in the Sermon on the Mount says: “YOU are the light of the world!”

And to quote a billboard from along highway 30:

“You are the light of the world - - SHINE ON!”

So how can WE - - shine on - - in our world today - - and in our lives?

One way - - is to hold on to the MYSTERY - - REVEALED to Paul through Christ:

Jesus offers salvation - - to all - - not just a small group.

In Jesus - - this amazing hope - - pokes holes in the darkness!

There is an old African tale that highlights the CHALLENGES with this:

This old folk tale is about a FROG and a SNAKE.

Once upon a time - - a FROG-CHILD was hopping along. / The frog child spotted something - - long and thin - - wiggling across its path.

“Hello there”, said the frog, “Why are you just LYING there?”

“I’m warning myself”, said the snake, “My name is SNAKE-CHILD, what’s yours?”

“Frog-child - - hey you wanna play together?””

And so - - they played for hours.

“Watch what I can do” - - and the frog jumped!

And the frog taught the snake to jump - -

- - and the snake taught the frog to slide on his belly.

Then - - they each went - - home.

When the frog-child showed his mother how he could SLIDE she asked - - “Where did you learn this!?” / And she told him not to play with the snake again: “The snake people have POISON in their teeth!”

Meanwhile a similar thing was happening at the home of the snake family.

Snake-father said: “We have always been on bad terms with frogs - - next time I see a frog - - I’ll EAT him up!””

And so - - now - - frogs and snakes - - keep their distance.

But maybe - - there are still children of snakes and frogs - - who hope for something else.

The MYSTERY hidden in God - - revealed in Christ is - - that we are ALL invited in.

That’s the light - - that pokes holes in the darkness.

And as difficult as YOU may find it to SHINE ON - - in our world - - that’s the calling.

Michael Lindvall tells a story about a pastor’s calling that inspires me to keep at it:

It’s called, “Strange Providence”

It’s a story not only for ministers - - but for anyone - - who has ever had a calling - - and anyone who has ever doubted their calling - - which is to say - - ALL of us...

The pastor visited Minnie one day and she told him a SECRET. / It was a secret that had been weighing on her for years - - a MYSTERY of sorts - - about his calling to the church.

She had been on the search committee that called him. / “And if he remembered”, she said, “There had been ANOTHER candidate” / Someone with many credentials and lots of experience.

Well - - she had put two letters in two envelopes - - one an acceptance letter - - and the other - - a rejection letter.

You see where this is going - - right?

There had been a MIXUP!

After almost a decade - - he found out that he had been called - - by mistake!

Later that afternoon - - he thought:

“So much that has come upon me in this life - - I did NOT search out nor choose.

Rather I found it - - by chance - - and accepted it as grace.”

Sometimes God works through us - - and sometimes in spite of us - -

but God works for GOOD.

The choice of the committee was a good choice - - but - - I was called.

Called NOT by that moment - - but because a few dozen people continue to trust me and I trust them - - when they are sick - - or trying to do something to help others.

“And I am called - - somehow - - by the fact that Minnie DARED to tell the truth.

Because people here know each other’s names.

And because they don’t go anywhere else!”

The mystery of grace is not only FOR all of us - - but somehow comes THROUGH all of us - - as we continue to respond to God’s call...

Being the light of the world - - has its challenges.

BUT - - it IS something we are all expected to do!

Remember Jesus himself says: "YOU are the light of the world!"

So...

"You are the light of the world - - SHINE ON!"