

Date: January 4, 2004

SUNDAY: Christmas 2 (Epiphany)

SERMON: (All) Eyes Only

Text(s): Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-15

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We Christians sometimes decry the commercialization of Christmas in our country. But every retailer knows as an indispensable fact of economic life that Christmas sales can make or break a balance sheet. For the commercial sector, Christmas doesn't begin on December 25, but on the Friday after Thanksgiving. It then ends abruptly at closing time on December 24, so that after the necessary one-day holiday, the after-Christmas January sales can begin, and we can be induced to go out and buy even more stuff.

Meanwhile, the old notion from the Middle Ages that Christmas should be celebrated for twelve days, culminating in the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6, has disappeared nearly everywhere except in the song about partridges in pear trees and swans a'swimming, and maids a'milking. Other than the fact that in many churches, we still follow the liturgical calendar and remember Epiphany on the second Sunday after Christmas Day, as we recall the biblical story of the three magi paying homage to the infant Jesus, Epiphany has lost much of its meaning as the culmination of Christmas.

However, I don't think that St. Matthew gave us this story of the magi following the star to Bethlehem simply to provide a nice literary finish to his story of Jesus' birth. No, Matthew's point in this story is much more serious, and much more pertinent than our romanticizing of the Christmas story often makes it. The appearing or revelation (which is what the word epiphany means) of the messiah to the magi summarizes, for Matthew, the whole point of Jesus' coming.

If you are a World War II history buff or enjoy reading spy novels, as I do, or if you were in the military, then you knew when you read the sermon title this morning, that the phrase "eyes only" refers to the most restrictive of

classifications of official documents, particularly documents transmitting military orders or those which contain secret intelligence. My wife, however, who cares absolutely nothing for the history of warfare, and whose only interest in espionage is watching James Bond movies, immediately thought of the old Bond film "*For Your Eyes Only*" starring Roger Moore. Just for fun, I did a Google search on the Internet on the phrase "eyes only." Seems as though Carol is in good company; after searching over ten pages of listings that came up, I still had not found a single one that had anything to do with the classification of documents. Most references were to the James Bond film *For Your Eyes Only*, starring Roger Moore, or ads for books about the Bond films at Amazon.com. Many more were pop-culture references to rock bands or rock videos, some were articles about computer security and encryption, systems for parental control of television and internet use by their children, even face-recognition software for use by police departments— just about everything except references to classification of official documents or items of intelligence, which was the original use of that phrase.

But at the risk being a clueless old fogey, I'm using the phrase in its original sense, since it helps us get at what both St. Matthew in his story of the magi and the author of the Epistle to the Ephesians have to say about God's purposes for the world— a purpose that reveals the true meaning of Christmas, and gives us a reason for celebrating other than giving an annual boost to our consumerist economy.

The author of our epistle lesson, who writes in the name of his spiritual father and mentor, St. Paul, says that until the resurrection of Jesus, God's purpose for the world was like a closely held government "secret." It was classified "Eyes only," and the only eyes able or qualified to understand it were God's own eyes. But now, he says, God's Holy Spirit has changed the classification of this top secret. It is now an open secret, a revealed mystery, for the eyes of everyone. "*Although I am the very least of the*

saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see (all eyes only) what is the divine management of the mystery [or secret] hidden for ages in God.” This revealed mystery, this open secret has two main parts: first, he says, *“the Gentiles have become fellow heirs [with Israel], members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in the Messiah, Jesus, through the Gospel.”* Second, he goes on, this earthshaking news of God’s all-inclusive saving love is now to be proclaimed, not only to Gentiles or individuals, but to all the spiritual powers and forces in the universe. In other words, this news is for institutions, organizations, bureaucracies, governments, economic systems, social structures, and all the other powers that affect and often control human life. It is news with a cosmic impact.

This is the same point that Matthew makes in his story of the pagan astrologers, the magi, who make their way to Bethlehem, following the star. They are Gentiles, strangers to the covenants by which God revealed himself to Israel. In the baby of Bethlehem, they discover what God had always intended, that those covenants included everyone, not just Israel.

Now the news that God loves everybody doesn’t sound particularly earthshaking to liberal-minded, tolerant people like us. We’ve had two thousand years and more to get used to that idea and for it to take root in our minds and in our religious beliefs. But we don’t have to look far for evidence of just what a radical notion that is, not only within St. Paul’s or Matthew’s world of the first century, but within our world in the twenty-first. Our world, as theirs was, is locked in a fierce “battle for God,” as author Karen Armstrong has termed it. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the agenda of Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda organization, and the conflicts within Christian denominations over the Bible, church doctrines, and the debate about women and homosexuals in the ministry are only a few of the

most blatant examples of the attempts of certain groups and whole nations to claim a special and exclusive relationship to God. We may pay lip service to a God whose love is universal, but in fact, we are much more comfortable dividing up our world into insiders and outsiders, us and them. And God is always *for us*, and *against them*. We seem to need an enemy against whom we define ourselves in order to feel that we’re on the right track.

Throughout the Hebrew scriptures, and especially in the writings of the great prophets, particularly Isaiah, Israel’s vocation was always understood as being a “light to the Gentiles.” In their life together, they were to set an example of social justice and political integrity, so that all nations would be led to the worship of the one God who had revealed himself to Abraham their ancestor and to Moses on Mt. Sinai in the giving of the Law. But like any group of people who are convinced that they have a grasp of the truth, it was all too easy to allow that truth to become a wall of separation between them and everyone else. Jews identified themselves as God’s people by engaging in certain practices such as circumcision of male children, special dietary rules and ritual purity laws as a way of signifying their obedience to the will of the one God. It was inevitable that over time, these distinguishing practices would become the basis for believing that there was some inherent or inbred distinction between Jews and other people as well. From time to time, prophets like Isaiah would remind them of their mission to be God’s witnesses, but it was difficult not to fall into the trap of the “us” and “them,” mentality.

St. Matthew wrote his story of the magi late in the first century, at a time when the church’s membership already included a large and growing number of Gentiles. The church had already taken root in Syria and in Arabia and in Egypt and Asia Minor. So, it’s understandable that he would see the story of the magi as the foreshadowing of what had already come to pass.

But it was St. Paul, that other visionary Israelite and intrepid traveler in the cause of the gospel, who several decades earlier made his missionary journeys across the Mediterranean world, planting local congregations of people who responded to the good news that they were included in God's plan to save the world.) Paul himself, in his letter to the Galatians, relates some of the struggles he went through with the other apostles, particularly Peter and James, over the issue of whether the gospel was for the Jews only or whether it was for the whole world.

It was Paul's experience of encountering the living Christ that revolutionized his own thinking on that score, and led to his break with the exclusiveness within his own Jewish tradition. His vision of the risen Christ convinced him that God had given his seal of approval to a crucified criminal, who for all practical intents and purposes, had become a Gentile, since crucifixion was regarded as God's curse on someone who was spiritually defiled. God had chosen to rescue this outcast, this unclean, defiled criminal from the powers of death. This could only mean, reasoned Paul, that God apparently didn't abide by the same distinctions between who was in and who was out that he and his fellow religious Jews did. If this crucified outcast, by divine power, had been raised from death, thereby anticipating the final resurrection of all the righteous, then, in fact, the old world of human distinctions had also come to an end, and we were living in a new world.

For Paul the logic was compelling: to go on making qualitative distinctions between clean and unclean, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, insider and outsider, would be sinning against God, the God who had demonstrated his own willingness to include even those spiritually unclean Gentiles.

So, off he went, this first-century frequent flyer (or perhaps we should say frequent sailor) spreading the good news, and it was very good news indeed to a world adrift in a sea of

competing religions and deities, an ocean of competing moralities, which often looked very much like simple immorality. To people who felt themselves excluded and powerless, the gospel came as a breath of fresh air. Slaves heard the good news eagerly. Their masters were probably a bit slower to acknowledge as good, the news that they and their slaves were equally beloved and equally accountable to God, but when they did, found themselves liberated as well. Women suddenly discovered that in God's eyes they were every bit as valuable and as fully human as men; and some men discovered it too, though certainly not all counted it a joyous discovery. The early Christians, as they began to be called, put these discoveries into action in their communal life. They modeled an alternative social order. They reached out to other excluded people—people who were crippled or handicapped in some way. People who were poor, orphans and widows, who had no place within civilized society—all found a home within the new community formed around the image of a crucified and risen Lord.

And as these communities formed and met together for worship, and lived their daily lives caring for one another and treating one another as beloved and valued children of God, the world around them began to sit up and take notice. "Behold, how these Christians love one another," was one early pagan response. It was a new thing; everybody loved their own family; most could find it in their hearts to love people of their own tribe or village. But loving strangers? Loving outcasts? Loving those who were physically or emotionally handicapped? Loving even their enemies? That's "a horse of a different color," as the old saying goes. That's incredible!

Well, St. Paul's take on that, as we hear it through his disciple's voice in Ephesians, says it is pretty incredible. And what's even more incredible, he says, is how God chooses to manage or administer this "all eyes only" mystery: *"to let everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all*

things, so that through the church the many-splendored wisdom of God might be made known.” Did you get that? It is Paul who was given grace to take the gospel to the Gentiles, and to make plain the mystery that had been hidden in the heart of God. But how is this mystery to become an open secret for the whole world? *Through the church.* It is in the existence of living communities of faith where the distinctions have fallen away, where the excluded are included, where whosoever will may come, that the all-inclusive love of God is revealed and the world’s longing for redemption finds its ground. We, in our life together, are the Epiphany for the world.

The great temptation of an age like ours, when one group feels their interests are being threatened by those whom they classify as distinct from them, is always to make the distinctions even sharper and codify them into law or discriminatory and repressive practices. Whether we do it as individuals or as nations, it’s bad news, and there is nothing in it that has the flavor or fragrance of salvation. It is the old world, under the rule of the powers of death, and that’s about all that can be said for it.

But the “plan of the mystery hidden for ages” has now been revealed, and in God’s administration of that revealed secret, you and I together as the church are responsible for making it visible to everyone’s eyes. We’re the heralds of the new world that here and is still to come in its fullness. We’re the ones who will either manifest this mystery to the world, or keep it hidden. It is our calling to let the light shine, to let the world have an epiphany: a revelation of a God who created all things, who loves everything he has created, and who wills all his children to share in the fathomless riches of Christ.

When we gather around the Lord’s Table, we testify by our very presence that God’s mysterious plan is openly working itself out, that here there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, neither Iraqi nor

American, neither white nor black, neither rich nor poor, but all distinctions have been set aside because of the birth of a child in Bethlehem. That, my friends, is what Christmas is really all about.