

Title: Mount Mystery  
Date: February 12, 2023  
Subject: The mystery of God's intent for the church has been revealed.  
Scripture: Ephesians 3:1 - 13

Sometimes people start telling a story and they're reminded of something else. They drop their train of thought and follow the detour. Meanwhile we wait for the story we wanted to hear. Depending on the person, we feel the diversion is a rabbit trail.

A case in point is our Scripture this morning. V. 1 begins a thought which is interrupted by a long parenthesis, a rabbit trail, and is resumed in v. 14. Since God is the author of Scripture who used the abilities, personalities, backgrounds, experiences of human writers to record his inspired word, he's the author of the rabbit trail. Isn't it good to know God can use rabbit trails, scattered minds?

Read Ephesians 3:1 - 13

#### I. Mystery revealed

*Mystery* jumps off the page in vv. 3, 4, 6 and 9. Mystery doesn't refer to something magical or mystical that's best told when the lights are dimmed. It isn't trying to figure out how a story will turn out. It isn't a puzzle to solve. It isn't a deep dark secret for only a few to learn. Ancient mystery religions thrived on secrets and mysteries which only a select few were allowed to learn. People wanted to be in the in group.

The mountain for today is Mount Mystery. When I searched for Mystery Mountain it took me to a 1930s series of western movies about a cowboy and his horse Tarzan. Other alternatives were connected with Pokémon and animated cartoons. Mount Mystery proved a better search.

Mount Mystery, at 7639 feet is about 40 miles from Seattle in the Olympic Mountains. It was named in the early 1900s by a member of the U.S. Forest Service "because he admired its regal appearance in foggy weather" [Parratt, Smitty. *Gods and Goblins: A Field Guide to Place Names of Olympic National Park (1st ed.)*].

We can work with mystery as something with a regal appearance though shrouded. The Biblical idea of mystery is something that had been previously hidden but has now been revealed and is available to anyone and everyone. It's no longer shrouded by fog but in clear view. It isn't only for a few lucky enlightened people who ascend the ladder of knowledge and become one of the special people. God's mystery can only be known through him revealing his wise plan that he's working out to its conclusion.

God tells us the mystery (v. 6) is God's plan of bringing together Jews and non-Jews, the Gentiles, into one body. This verse has another keyword – together – used three times. No group is better or superior to another. All are brought together. As we saw last week the dividing wall of hostility between ethnic groups has been broken down. All are united in one body by the promise that comes through faith in Jesus Christ.

Vv. 11, 12 lay out more of God's plan. His eternal purpose was to bring all peoples together in Christ. It is then, as the body of Christ, the building of God, the church, that they can approach God.

It's much easier to have 20/20 hindsight. Deer hunting. 16 years old. Noise of crunching from the dense brush. Thought it was a hunter who didn't care how much noise he made. Huge, ginormous buck appeared. Deer fever kicking in. Raised rifle to find good target. Scope full of hair and brush. Going through my mind was dad missing a deer because a small branch had deflected the bullet. Didn't want that to happen. Hindsight -- should have shot as there was lots of snow for tracking. Still kick myself.

Followers of Christ have the benefit of hindsight. We have God's plan laid out in Christ as given in the Bible. People who lived before Christ were operating in fog. They didn't know about the church.

People had some knowledge about the Lord's promises. A main one was the Lord's promise to Abraham to make him a great nation and bless him; make his name great, and all peoples on earth would be blessed through him (Genesis 12:2, 3). The Jewish people hung their hat on tracing their ancestry to Abraham. They were chosen to be God's vehicle to bring the light of salvation to the entire world, to lead people to him. Epic failure. Most Jews turned away from God as shown by what happened after the exodus from Egypt and rejection of Jesus.

There were morsels and crumbs dropped along the path by people like Moses, Isaiah and Daniel. People knew enough to be able to follow God and trust him but weren't able to put it all together. God promised he'd do something new, establish a new covenant (Jeremiah 30 - 33). We celebrate it at communion as Jesus said the bread and the cup are symbols of the new covenant in his blood (1 Corinthians 11:25). All people who follow the God of the Bible can trace their roots to Abraham.

The totality of God's plan wasn't revealed to people who lived before Christ. It wasn't completely unknown but not fully known as it was once Christ came.

## II. Paul's relationship to the mystery vv. 1- 5, 7 -9

A. Partner. Paul was one of those through whom God revealed the mystery. It wasn't his completely. He writes in v. 5 it's now been revealed to God's holy apostles and prophets. He and others were in the privileged position of sharing God's truth about Jesus Christ.

When the apostle was on trial he stated his mission was rooted in history, "I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen - that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles" (Acts 26:22, 23).

In other places he clarifies how the Lord works: "But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, *Lord, who has believed our message?* Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. But I ask: did they not hear? Of course they did: *their voice is gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world*" (quote from David in Psalm 19). "And Isaiah boldly says, *I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me* [Speaking of the Gentiles (Romans 10:16 - 18, 20)]. "For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy, as it is written: *Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name.* Again, it says, *Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.* And

again, *Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and sing praises to him all you peoples.* And again, Isaiah says, *The root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nation; the Gentiles will hope in him*” (Rom 15:8-12).

B. Prisoner. Paul wrote Ephesians while in prison having been arrested 5 years earlier for his ministry to Gentiles. But he wasn't thinking about being a prisoner of Rome. Nor was he a prisoner to his circumstances. He was a prisoner of Jesus Christ (also in 4:1). He was held in chains to Jesus, the one who directly and sovereignly controlled him.

Chuck Colson was sent to prison for his involvement in covering up the Watergate break in to Democratic headquarters during Richard Nixon's presidency. He became a follower of Jesus Christ. After he was released he began the ministry Prison Fellowship which is in hundreds of prisons throughout the USA. Colson summed up his life: “The real legacy of my life was my biggest failure – that I was an ex-convict. My great humiliation – being sent to prison – was the beginning of God’s greatest use of my life; He chose the one experience in which I could not glory for His glory...My lowest days as a Christian (and there were low ones— 7 months worth of them in prison, to be exact) have been more fulfilling and rewarding than all the days of glory in the White House” (Charles Colson, *Loving God*).

Paul didn't view being in prison as a source of humiliation but a source of pride. It was because he'd already become a prisoner of Christ and was willing to suffer whatever that entailed.

C. Servant. Paul was a servant. He had a master. Someone told him what he could do and couldn't do. But he was a willing servant. Paul was ecstatic to be in the service of Jesus Christ. Not only did he view himself as a servant of Jesus, he considered himself to be the lowest servant: “less than the least of all God's people” (v. 8). He didn't have narcissistic or inflammatory views of his identity. He served Jesus Christ.

He viewed the position as an act of God’s grace (vv. 7, 8). The NIV Study Bible says this was “a special endowment that brings responsibility to service.” It was God’s gift to be accepted and used.

### III. God's intent for the mystery v. 10

God intended that his program that had been shrouded in mystery would be revealed. He did this as by sending Jesus Christ to earth and brings into being the church.

God is in show business. He's staging a show and showing off as he does it.

The church is the actor onstage who performs God's production. He’s written the script, lines to speak about Jesus - he brings eternal life, guarantees forgiveness of sins, provides true racial harmony through combining all people into one group as they had been created and unites peoples from various backgrounds. The play is about giving the glory to Jesus. It’s a grand and remarkable privilege to be cast in this role.

We might expect the audience would be other people who hear the church proclaim the Good News of Jesus, what he’s done for us and what he can do for them. They’re part of the audience but not the only ones watching the performance and not the ones in the theater at the moment.

Reread V. 10

The audience is the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. Sometimes it's hard for us to get firmly into our minds that there's a spiritual dimension even more real than the physical things we see, taste, touch, smell and hear. It's the real real.

The audience of rulers and authorities includes God's kingdom, the forces marshalled alongside the Heavenly Father and the kingdom of evil, the forces of wickedness siding with the devil. In the first act Christ was placed above all earthly and heavenly powers (1:20 - 22). The devil and his minions know their fate, their doom has been sealed. The angels and other heavenly beings know Christ is ruling and reigning.

The second act advances the plot. God showcases what he can do as Christ operates in the church. He displays his power as he turns his enemies into allies, transforms rebellious sinners into his children. When the devil and heaven's angels see the church, they see the body of Christ and his work on the cross.

God produces and directs a drama through which to silence his doubters, those who rebelled against him. They look on with rapt attention as they squirm in their seats. The rulers and authorities in God's kingdom who serve under him applaud loudly, crying out "encore," anticipating the closing curtain. But the play hasn't come to its show-stopping grand finale.

An NIV Study Bible note "It is a staggering thought that the church on earth is observed, so to speak, by these spiritual powers and that to the degree the church is spiritually united it portrays to them the wisdom of God" (NIV Study Bible note on Ephesians 3:10).

God doesn't want to blow the minds only of heavenly powers. He wants a similar reaction from us. He wants us to be amazed, in awe that the church is God's actor, illustration and storyteller of God's wisdom.

I used a quote last week in the opening Sunday school study of Philippians that bears repeating. It fits this context so all can hear it and those who heard can benefit from rehearing. It's from Stuart Briscoe, former pastor of Elmbrook Church. "Sometimes I think that we talk a little too glibly about Christ's work in our lives. To really believe that the Lord of heaven is at work in a tiny little life is either arrogant nonsense or magnificent truth. A convinced Christian, of course, rules out the nonsense theory and is locked to the truth theory. But to take this lightly is to do a massive truth a grave injustice" (Stuart Briscoe, Bound for Joy, P. 13).

IV. Don't give in to discouragement. V. 13

The first section of chapter 3 ends with an appeal to not become discouraged. John Stott said: "The Christian's chief occupational hazards are depression and discouragement." Paul was going through sufferings. He'd gone through many because of his faith in Christ - brutally mistreated, verbally assaulted, constant danger from people, exposure to weather and the attacks of the devil...and being in prison.

Through all he experienced, he wasn't discouraged. That's not the underlying mood of this or the other books he wrote from prison, like Philippians, which is a call to joy. Here's the summary statement: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4).

He pleads with people to not give in to discouragement because bad things had happened, that he was in prison and wasn't free to continue to proclaim Jesus. He urges them not to feel bad for him or to ring their

hands because of the situation, thinking that somehow he'd failed or God had failed him. He didn't want them to faint from lack of strength or turn cowardly. He certainly didn't feel that way.

Paul felt suffering and difficulties were a source of joy and glory. It's explained: "There is a peculiar beauty in the thought suggested by the words "which is your glory." The suffering, triumphantly borne and actually turned to the furtherance of the gospel, is certainly a "glory," in the proof which it gives of the power of the truth and the grace of Christ...while the suffering falls on himself, the glory passes to the Church, for which he suffers, and in which he is content to sink himself" (Ellicott's Commentary on Ephesians 3:13).

Another says, "Which is your glory - Which tends to your honor and welfare. You have occasion to rejoice that you have a friend who is willing thus to suffer for you; you have occasion to rejoice in all the benefits which will result to you from his trials in your behalf" (Barnes' Notes on Ephesians 3:13).

What's the application for us? We can and should feel bad during sufferings – when people gossip behind our back, a co-worker gives a false report to the boss, death of a loved one, persecuted for taking a stand for Jesus. Those things hurt. They're not fun.

There are things that will distress and dispirit us but we shouldn't let them get the best of us. We don't have to give in to discouragement. We don't have to start thinking: "God doesn't like me anymore. God doesn't care. It's useless to follow him. I'm a failure. God's a failure."

Joni Eareckson Tada became a quadriplegic after a diving accident in her teens. She has become a gifted artist using a brush in her teeth, author and speaker drawing thousands and thousands to closer Christ. "Please know that when I take up my cross every day I am not talking about my wheelchair. My wheelchair is not my cross to bear. Neither is your cane or walker your cross. Neither is your dead-end job or your irksome in-laws. Your cross to bear is not your migraine headaches, not your sinus infection, not your stiff joints. That is not your cross to bear. My cross is not my wheelchair; it is my attitude. Your cross is your attitude about your dead-end job and your in-laws. It is your attitude about your aches and pains.

"Any complaints, any grumblings, any disputings or murmurings, any anxieties, any worries, any resentments or anything that hints of a raging torrent of bitterness—these are the things God calls me to die to daily. For when I do, I not only become like him in his death (that is, taking up my cross and dying to the sin that he died for on his cross), but the power of the resurrection puts to death any doubts, fears, grumblings, and disputings.

"And I get to become like him in his life. I get to experience the intimate fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, the sweetness and the preciousness of the Savior. I become holy as he is holy. O God, "you will make me full of gladness with your presence" (Acts 2:28)" (Taken from *Suffering & The Sovereignty of God* by John Piper & Justin Taylor).

A William Shakespeare character (Jacques in *As You Like It*): "All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players." He traces seven acts from infancy to second childishness seeing little of value. God has a grander point of view. We aren't merely players but his chosen actors in his heavenly production.