

"GOD'S MYSTERIOUS PLAN"

Ephesians 1:3-14

Sermon preached by Dr. Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

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Two centuries before Christ, the King of Egypt wanted a lighthouse built in Alexandria, Egypt. He also wanted his name engraved at the top of the lighthouse. The builder carried out his orders, but first, he carved his own name in the stone. Then he plastered over his name and engraved the name of the king. The salt spray, wind, and rain gradually loosened the plaster, which erased the king's name completely. This left only the real builder's name. The builder had the last laugh, though, of course, neither he nor the king lived to see it.

This little story from ancient history is a metaphor that perfectly illustrates how the reign of God supersedes and outlasts our vain attempts to place ourselves at the top of the pecking order. The power brokers of the world believe they'll have the last word, but God confounds their efforts with his last word, Jesus Christ.

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. All things were made through him, and without him, nothing came into being.

God's creative power may not be always plain to see. At the same time the world's power brokers may seem to be riding high. They have their day, but time passes and they're long gone.

How many of us would know the names of the Emperor Augustus or King Herod if they weren't mentioned in the Christmas story? Unless you were a student of ancient history you wouldn't. But everybody, whether you're a Christian or not, at least is familiar with the name Jesus Christ. Like the builder who hid his name under the plaster God has the last laugh.

But God's last laugh isn't meant to be cruel or vindictive. Instead God invites us to laugh along with him because his creative power, and awesome, mysterious ways are all for our own good.

Today we celebrate the Epiphany of our Lord. Epiphany simply means to reveal or make known. The gospel lesson for this first Sunday of the New Year tells the story of the Magi, the mysterious visitors from the East who brought their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the baby Jesus. These wise men were the first

Gentiles or non Jews to worship the Christ Child.

You may remember that King Herod wanted the wise men to tell him where to find the baby so he could kill him, because Herod was afraid this newborn king would threaten his own power. But the wise men were warned in a dream not to trust Herod, so they returned home on another road. Likewise Joseph, Jesus' father, was also warned in a dream to flee to Egypt. Herod's plans were thwarted by the mysterious power of God unfolding all around him, in spite of him.

This morning's Bible passage is from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesian Church. Paul wanted the Christians in this young congregation to be aware of God's mysterious, awesome power in our world. And Paul especially wants us to know the power of God, shrouded in mystery, whether you realize it or not, whether you see it or not, is always unfolding around us, working for our own good. Listen again to just a few of these random verses lifted from this morning's lesson.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love."

Translation: Even before God created the world, before the first human being fell under the silly illusion that he didn't need God, he could be his own God, God had a plan for our salvation, to save us from our dysfunctional, unhealthy attitudes that distorted our God created image, so that once again, through Christ, we can reclaim our inheritance as God's beloved children.

And then Paul wrote this: **"With all wisdom and insight God has made known to us (Epiphany) the mystery of his will...as a plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth."**

Translation: God wants you to trust in his mysterious ways, and live knowing God has a plan for your life. You were created for a purpose, to know God and enjoy him forever. The particulars of your purpose, where you live, how you spend your time, who is your neighbor, what is your personal ministry, these particulars, in God's time, will become clear to you, as you surrender your life to Jesus, become his disciple by following his example of servanthood.

That may sound odd, you discover God's purpose for you by surrendering

yourself to Christ, but that's God's mysterious way which is just the opposite of the world's way. In our post modern, post Christian culture money and power rule the world. But when men and women exercise their power and spend their money in a vacuum, there's no controlling authority to balance worldly power and wealth with justice, kindness and mercy. That's why, without Christ it's a dog eat dog world, where might makes right and it's the survival of the fittest.

That's the nightmare we've created in the world. And that's why the Word became flesh, to live among us. Jesus was born to bring us back to God, and he was willing to lay down his life so that through the mystery of his death and resurrection, you and I can be saved from our dog eat dog mentality and fulfill God's plan for our lives, finding our eternal purpose in Christ as his disciples who willingly give up our own power in order to make love possible.

A New York banker was accosted by a drunk on a commuter train. The banker tried to ignore the drunk, which only made things worse. Finally, the drunk forced a confrontation. The banker had a choice. He looked the man straight in the eye and taking a risk said gently, "**You know, God really loves you.**"

In that instant, the drunk man's hostility melted away. He sat down and said, "**My mother used to talk like that,**" and then he began to open up. The two men sat and talked for a long time on that train, and the banker told the man about God's love, and how God could help him turn his life around. Over the next several months, these men spoke to one another often.

Think how differently that encounter could have gone. The banker had all the power on his side. He could've insulted the drunk man, or allowed himself to be drawn into a fistfight. He could've called on the police or other passengers. He could've continued ignoring the man, denying the man even the basic human dignity of having his presence acknowledged. Instead, he chose to respond to the drunk man with God's love and mercy. Why? Because he served a King who did the same.

Pretty soon our Christmas decorations will be packed away for another year, but please don't pack away the message of Christmas. Christ is born, God is with us. Peace on earth, good will to all. Keep this good news deep in your heart. Nurture the presence of the Christ Child in your soul. Let his love become your love. And as we gather around his table, ponder the mystery of God becoming flesh, remember his birth, death and resurrection for your sake and claim your purpose as a servant of God, created in the image of God.

Let us pray!