

SERMON

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Immanuel Lutheran Church - Bartlett, IL

Epiphany Sunday, A - January 4, 2026

Romans 8:31b-39, Ephesians 3:1-12, Matthew 2:1-12

Many people like mysteries--

- novels,
- movies.

I enjoy mysteries--

- especially certain re-runs on TV
- like Father Dowling and his detective work with his sidekick,
- the nun “Steve.”
- And Father Brown.
- And definitely, reruns of the detective Columbo.

In today's Epistle, the word “mystery” is used by Saint Paul four times.

He refers to

- “the **mystery** made known to me by revelation” (v. 3)
- “the **mystery** of Christ” (v. 4)

And then he writes in v. 8,

“This **mystery** is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.”

And of how his ministry is to

“bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the **mystery** hidden for ages in God who created all things so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known.”

So when we are speaking of God, MYSTERY is involved.

Yet that is a problem for many people-- even for those who like mysteries in novels and movies.

This is the issue:

- In our sinful pride,
- we sinners think that we need to **understand** God
- if He expects us to believe in Him
- and to take Him seriously.

And that can lead to deadly spiritual disaster.

It works like this.

Our problems or observations lead us to faith questions--

- especially “WHY?”
- WHY is God permitting this or that?
- And in our yearning to understand,
- we develop doubts.

Doubts about God’s presence and goodness and care

- often at the very time we need
- the strength and comfort of faith the most.

Often the answer to WHY remains a **mystery**....

Sometimes it **is** revealed, at least in small parts,

- but later on,
- as we begin to see more clearly the hand of God--
- usually when we **look back** over our lives
- from a distance....

But the coming of the strange wise men from the East

- to worship the baby Jesus--
- should jar our making the easy assumption
- that we should understand God.

Their coming **was** and **continues to be** an amazing mystery--

- a mystery in which the God who is **beyond**
- our human understanding**
- was involved.

They were likely from the area of present day Iran

- where the religion of Zoroaster was popular.
- So not only were they Gentiles, but also followers of another religion.

And, of all things,

- it was their **reading of the stars**
- that brought them to the Baby Jesus.

Part of their work as magi was

- to determine from the stars the course of human events--
- as highly regarded astrologers--
- not a very religious-sounding profession.

Christians are normally warned against using astrology

- as a guide to their lives.
- That practice can easily be used by Satan to MISguide us.
- We are to base our lives on the faithful Word of God....

God is not limited by the warnings and guidelines that we humans need.

That the Wise Men were also Gentiles--

- was a sign that God was now not limiting His working out
- promises of salvation
- only to the people of Israel.

So the One who made the stars now uses stars

- in a mysterious way to draw people
- from a totally different background to worship His Son,
- the promised son of David.

The prophets had predicted this would happen--

- that salvation would come also to the Gentiles.

- But it was still a very shocking concept for the Jewish people to accept,
- not something they expected from their God,
- not the way they thought He should act.

And the magi were even also mysteriously guided by a dream--

- warned by that dream not to return to Herod.

Now again,

- Christians are cautioned not to assume that a dream
 - that seems to be from God
 - is necessarily from God--
 - but maybe even from Satan.
- Cautioned not to let the dream become their basis for actions--
 - especially such actions that may be contrary
 - to the revealed Word of God.

But this account should make us sit up and take notice

- whenever we begin to think
 - that we have God all figured out.

There is always more to God

- and His ways
- than He chooses to reveal to us
- or that we have been able to grasp.

So what can **we** learn from this mysterious account?

- For one thing, we can learn at the very least not to start judging God
- when we can't understand something--
- something in our life,
- or maybe in the life of a loved one,
- or even in the daily news.

We should never think that we know enough

- to sit in judgment over God
- and over what we understand to be His ways.

Because then we have mistakenly set up ourselves as God.

Neither should we allow ourselves to

- become anxious
- and doubting
- just because we can't know something that is unknowable--
- when our life and its trials seem to make no sense to us
- that we can see at the time....

Or when we become anxious just listening to the news--

- not only about what's happening to others,
- but also about what **WE** will be facing in a coming year--

- news generally filled with all sorts of frightening possibilities and threats.

It's no accident that suicide rates have increased among young people

- who become educated about the threats, even inundated by them,
- but not well-educated about the God who is bigger than those threats....

Again, we are not called to **understand**.

- If we could, that "God" would not be God at all,
- but just a projection of our own minds, an idol.

We are called to trust in that which is beyond our ability to comprehend--

- both due to the limited nature of our minds,
- and also due to sin,
- which has badly distorted
- and even destroyed
- our ability to be in satisfactory communication with God.

We are called to trust.

As the words of Paul to the Romans remind us:

"He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?..."

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God

which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” - Romans 8:32ff.

That kind of love is far beyond human understanding.

- It stretches the mind beyond its breaking point.

- It's higher than the heavens

- and deeper than the seas,

- and wider than east is from west.

Its knowledge is to be received as a gift,

- through faith that centers in Christ Jesus.

In the words of the Christmas Gospel from St. John,

“No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made Him known.”

Accepting that God is beyond our limited understanding

- suggests another caution:

We should be on our guard

- against the attitudes and teachings of know-it-all type Christians--

- whether they are left-wing liberals

- who easily and proudly deny biblical truths

- on the basis of their human reason

- or whether they are on the other end of the spectrum

- pretending they know all there is to know about God,

- so that there is no possibility of mystery.

- Often Christians like the latter have a list of rules or “principles”
- about how to make God work for you,
- almost like a robot--
- or a system for predicting the future,
- even the time of the end,
- which Jesus Himself said is unknown.

Hardly anything is a mystery to such types.

But God is bigger than our minds.

- He IS mystery.
- Yet He graciously reveals to us
- what He wants us to know about Himself,
- especially what we need to know for our salvation.

In summary, let's beware of ever thinking

- we know enough about God's ways
- to write Him out of our lives
- or the decisions we make--
- as though He does not care or cannot be trusted,
- or as though He may not even be there at all.

Always remember, in the words of Paul to the Ephesians in our epistle,

- God has a plan in the mystery.

That is to bring His “**unsearchable riches of Christ**” to the Gentiles-- -

- that is, to all the world, not merely to the Jews--
- including US--
- and to do this through the Church.

“This was according to His eternal purpose that He has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom WE have boldness and ACCESS **with confidence** THROUGH OUR FAITH IN HIM....

Holy Communion is certainly a mystery.

Here in the earthly elements of bread and wine,

- the One through whom all things were created
- brings to us His very Body and Blood
- given and shed for our forgiveness, life and eternal salvation.

To try to explain such a mystery by our limited minds is to fall into a trap.

- We might say like many Protestants, “I can’t understand this.
- So it can’t be.
- This must only be a symbol, nothing more.”

Or like Roman Catholics

- we might explain that the bread and wine aren’t really there
- if this is truly the Body and Blood of Christ,
- but the bread and wine only appear to be there....

- The doctrine of Transubstantiation.

Lutherans, much like the Orthodox,

- prefer **not to explain the mystery**,

- but simply to receive it.

The very Son of God gives His Holy Supper to us in this way,

- and so we receive it by faith

- without attempting to explain the mystery.

So we do not just “observe” the Lord’s Supper.

- We CELEBRATE IT!

And so, as we remember the mysterious coming of the magi

- to the humble Baby Lord Jesus,

- we too come worshipfully into His Presence in the Holy Sacrament,

- where His glory is hidden in the humble elements of bread and wine.

God led us here too.

- Not by the leading of a star,

- but by the very light of Christ in the Gospel--

- shared by parents and pastors and teachers and friends.

God put them in our lives. God led us here....

May we determine always to welcome the mystery

- and not to fear it--

- but to think of mystery as a normal sign of the presence of God Himself.

And to worship Him as the magi did!

- And **never ever** decide we know better,

- just because we can't understand it all.

Then that peace of God, which far surpasses human understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, to life everlasting. Amen.