We are nearing the end of our series “In Christ,” this walk through Ephesians chapters 1-3, almost circling back to the place we started six weeks ago in chapter three starting in v. 14. As we’ve been working forward, we’ve been talking about how Paul is tackling questions about the foundations of our faith, of salvation, of the church, with all of it being viewed through the lens of our identity specifically “in Christ.” And at this point in the letter, he has just gotten done talking about how the body of Christ has been gathered, built together, almost like it was forged, particularly by the joining of God’s covenant people, the “commonwealth of Israel” as he puts it, to now include those known as Gentiles, everyone else, everyone else who has been brought near by the cross of Jesus. And this joining together is the church, a body united not by ethnicity or theological opinion or because they were just nice people, but by their very identity in Christ himself. And now we find Paul giving a bit of biography, a bit of testimony, and we find him talking about grace—albeit grace in a different way than he has before—and we find him talking about a mystery, one that has been revealed. Will you pray with me?

_Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen._

Some scholars think Paul takes a sidetrack here, goes off on a tangent that doesn’t really relate to the topic at hand. You can kind of see why they think so. V. 1 reads, “This is the reason that I, Paul, am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles,” and then some of your Bibles might even have a dash there going into v. 2, “for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given me for you,” and then the entirety of the passage that we just read is just an aside that Paul indulges before getting back on point in v. 14, coming back to “For this reason,” and so on. That’s what some scholars think. They think Paul got distracted here. I’m not so sure.

Paul’s definitely giving a bit of testimony here, sharing about his status as a prisoner. It’s not clear what prison he’s writing from. Some think it was while he was in Ephesus itself. Some think it was while he was under house arrest in Rome. Some think Paul didn’t even write this, but that’s a whole other story—come talk to me if you’re curious about that.

But then he shares a bit about how he came to the scope of his ministry, that is, ministry specifically to the Gentiles. He calls it later in v. 8, “this grace was given to me to bring the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ.” But the way he talks about it at first doesn’t make it sound like it was something that he really chose or something he did because he realized this conviction for it. Kind of the opposite. It calls it a “mystery,” something hidden, that, as v. 3 puts it, “was made known to [him] by revelation.” It wasn’t something he discovered. It wasn’t something he deduced by reason. It wasn’t something he created. It was something hidden, something mysterious, that was later revealed, and it didn’t come from him.
I heard this story about Keith Richards, guitarist for the Rolling Stones. Had to do with how the song “Satisfaction” came about. One of the most recognizable guitar riffs in rock ‘n’ roll history. You probably know it. But it didn’t get written in some studio songwriting session. This is what happened. Richards wakes up one morning, and he sees the cassette tape recorder he kept next to his bed. But to his surprise, he finds that there’s something on it, because it’s all the way at the end of the spool. So, he rewinds it back to the beginning of the side and starts listening. And for just a couple of minutes, he hears the rough recording of this riff over and over…. He had apparently woken up in the middle of the night, grabbed his guitar, pressed record, and played it. Then on the recording, and I love this part, you hear him drop the guitar, pass out on the bed, and then it’s just 40 minutes of snoring. And in the morning, he had no memory of it. Couldn’t have replicated it. Arguably the most famous guitar riff in rock ‘n’ roll history, and I mean, it’s just three notes over and over again, this isn’t Mozart, but it came about after a night when I’m sure he just had too much milk before bed. Point is, by the morning, he couldn’t have told you where it came from.

I’m in questionable territory comparing Paul to Keith Richards, but for Paul, he couldn’t tell you where his message came from, or rather he couldn’t tell you that it came from him. As he’s giving this brief bit of testimony about what has set him on this path and this ministry, he describes it as something that was a mystery, “the mystery of Christ,” he puts it, something that was hidden, and it wasn’t him who discovered it. It was revealed.

This mystery, it turns out, wasn’t just a mystery for Paul. He tells us in v. 5, “In former generations, this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.” It wasn’t just Paul that was in the dark, but humankind was in the dark, but by the apostles and the prophets something is made known. And Paul specifies what it is. He tells what this mystery is. V. 6 reads, “that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”

Some of you might be thinking right now, “That’s the mystery? All that build up, the great secret and now the great truth of history, and that’s the best Paul can come up with? ‘The Gentiles have become fellow heirs’? Not all that remarkable if you ask me.” And I suppose it wouldn’t be when you first think about it.

But then you might think about all that Paul has said about the purposes of God, the eternal choices of God, the saving grace of God, the foundation of the church, the breaking down of hostility between Jew and Gentile, and underneath all that, the expansion of covenant people of God through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus to include those who were at first excluded, and then maybe it starts to make sense why it was such a big deal, to Paul at least anyway.

But why should it be a big deal to us? Why should the writings of a 1st century disgraced Jew and all his dense, hard-to-understand imagery and jargon matter to us now? Why should it matter to us that he says that “the Gentiles have become fellow heirs”? Why should the story of an ancient nation and its relationship with its God matter to us today? That’s kind of a mystery, honestly.

Quick history quiz. A bit of a trivia test. By show of hands, how many of you have ever heard of Urartu? Not seeing many hands. Kind of figured. Urartu was an ancient kingdom located in what is now eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, and Armenia. In fact, the nation of Armenia can trace some of its roots back to the ancient kingdom of Urartu. This was a nation that for a brief period of time, like in the 9th century BC, was something of a regional power and
every so often could hold its own, but by and large it was always getting squashed by whatever empire was trouncing through there, whether it was the Assyrians or the Babylonians or the Persians.

Next trivia question. How many of you have heard of Khaldi? Not seeing many hands either. Khaldi was one of the main deities for the Urartu people, worshiped as a god of victory and a god of war.

Third trivia question: how many of you have heard of Margameshkal? That was a trick question. I just made that one up.

Here’s why I brought up Urartu and Khaldi. Urartu as an ancient kingdom has a history that in many ways in remarkably similar to the ancient kingdom of Israel. For the most part a small, regional kingdom, with its own god. Briefly a regional power that every so often could stand up to the big boys, but for the most part, tended to get trampled underfoot by whatever geopolitical power struggles were going on.

So excepting those who are of Turkish or Armenian descent or those who are scholars in the Ancient Near East, why is the kingdom of Urartu and its relationship with its god Khaldi little more than a footnote in the pages of history, while on the other hand, the kingdom of Israel and its relationship with its God is part of a narrative that shapes the spiritual identity of billions today? A quirk of history? Kind of hard to believe. That’s kind of a mystery, honestly.

For Paul, this news, this gospel, this mystery, is that the God of Israel has from the foundations of the world chosen to be at work in and through a covenant people, and now, that covenant by grace through the blood of his Son is revealed and expanded in this great redemptive work in the world of making alive that which was dead. This is why Paul says that this great truth, this great mystery, this great news, is precisely that God’s work in and through Israel is now something God is doing on a global scale, and it’s a message, a gospel, that’s meant to be shared.

And he, meaning Paul, is by grace a servant of this gospel, of this mystery, commissioned to bring this news to those now gathered by grace into this covenant people, into this family. And he tells us, he didn’t discover this. He didn’t come up with this. It’s a mystery, honestly.

Furthermore, he’s telling us that it’s not just through him, but through the entire church, that this news is to be spread. He tells us in v. 10, “so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.”

And it’s this verse right here that’s why I’m not so sure this whole section in the letter is Paul just getting distracted and sidetracked. This is where the letter starts to turn outward. This is where the good news goes global.

Paul’s been talking a lot about grace up until this point. God’s grace as something to be praised in 1:6, God’s grace as the means by which we are saved in 2:5, 8, and the common thread is that the grace of God is something that’s given not earned. But now, Paul talks about grace in a slightly different way. Three times in this passage Paul talks about grace: v. 2 “the commission of God’s grace that was given me for you,” v. 7 “the gift of God’s grace that was given me by the working of his power,” and v. 8 “this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ.” And it’s consistent in that the grace of God is still something given, not earned. But notice how Paul talks about it here. Grace here isn’t so much about how Paul has been saved, but more about how Paul has been empowered, how Paul has been sent. Paul, as a servant of this gospel, of this mystery, is saying that it is not by his own power or ability that he seeks to go to the corners of the world spreading this news of redemption and life, this mission that has landed him in prison writing this in the first place. It is not of his own
resolve that he goes. It is not his own skill that against all odds makes him effective. It is grace
that sends him. And a good thing too.

Just this past week, our Worship Committee was meeting, and part of the meeting was a
bit of brainstorming for our preaching planning and sermon series for 2020. By the way, if you
have any thoughts of areas of Scripture or topics or themes that you think, you know, it’d mean a
lot to talk about, shoot me a line. We’re right in the middle of that process. But during that
meeting, one of our elders, Elise Denneny, who’s up in the choir right now, shared one thought
that I felt was really poignant. She shared just how hard it is to feel equipped to share and speak
of faith in a world that is skeptical of it, how hard it is to even begin to answer some of the
challenges that face the church, to even begin to give an account that despite all the flaws within
ourselves, all the flaws within the church, we carry good news for the world, for everyone.

Put another way, if the task set before us, as Paul puts it, is nothing less than bearing
news of the great mystery of Christ to the world, making known the wisdom of God in all of its
rich variety, how the heck are we supposed to do that? How are we supposed to understand,
much less share all that stuff about being made alive and Jews and Gentiles and breaking down
barriers and from the foundations of the world and a plan for the fullness of time? It’s
overwhelming. It’s scary. And if you’re like me, I don’t know how to do it. It’s a mystery
honestly.

But “Although,” Paul writes, “I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to
me.”

Friends, the good news of Christ, that our identities are wrapped up in him, that our
salvation is wrapped up in him, that our fellowship is wrapped up in him, is indeed a gift of
grace, one that assures us, one that makes us alive. But while it is grace that saves you, grace that
gathers you, it is also grace that sends you, and if you go in that grace, “in boldness and
confidence through faith in him,” the Lord will give you the words.