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Epiphany • Ephesians 3:1–12 • January 4, 2015

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He leads us to say “Abba Father.” I used the Lord’s Prayer here. Then I went bigger again to speak of what it’s like to be in God’s family with the gift of the Holy Spirit present in the life of the church. In answer to the works of the flesh earlier in the sermon, I brought in the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23). Then I spoke three short prayers, each beginning with “Abba, Father.” One was for patience in an angry world. Another was for compassion for those who struggle with abuse and addiction. The third was for kindness and gentleness.

I finished the sermon by telling of a pastor who, at the time of the sermon, was adopting two children from overseas. The family would need to live for at least six weeks in that country to complete the adoptions. The congregation where he had been a pastor for only one year was incredibly supportive, giving him time away from the congregation that was needed and helping with fundraisers. The pastor and his wife and their two children flew overseas to adopt the children. The children to be adopted were at an orphanage. One has scoliosis and is in a wheelchair. Within a couple of visits that child was starting to say “papa.” And, where is the adoption taking place? Ukraine. In the midst of the anger and violence is compassion, kindness, and patience. This is what the family of God looks like when adopted by our Abba Father because of the Christmas gift named Jesus, and the Holy Spirit forming his fruit in us brothers and sisters. We may be born into the human family, but when you are adopted into God’s family, it’s Christmas every day.

Glenn A. Nielsen

Endnotes
1 I had the opportunity to preach this sermon at a congregation in the St. Louis area on Pentecost Sunday. The following annotated structure gives a summary of each section and the examples I used during the sermon. Since the structure is to be used during the Christmas season, examples that are more recent may be available, especially ones that connect with the congregation’s celebration of Christmas.
3 When I asked the pastor what agency he and his wife were working through, he wrote: “While we are technically doing an independent adoption we found our facilitation team through the fine folks at reecesrainbow.org who also hosted our grant fund.”

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Notes on the Pericope
The Old Testament people knew that God had promised life and salvation to all nations (e.g., see Genesis 12:3 and Isaiah 60:1–6, the appointed OT lesson), but they did not know how he would do that. God made this clear through his Son and in the witness of the apostles. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians both explains this and offers God’s promises to all people.

From Sinai on, the requirements of the law had distinguished Jews from Gentiles. But, in his life, death, and resurrection, Christ brought down the “middle wall of partition”
made of “the law of commandments” (Eph 2:14–15). In his life, he did not strictly uphold the Law, and he openly engaged and brought blessings to sinners, Samaritans, Canaanites, and other Gentiles. He did so, even to the point of being rejected and crucified (2:16; cf. Gal 3:10–14; 4:4–7). But, God raised Jesus from dead, which vindicated Jesus on all counts, including his stance toward the law and toward Gentiles. Now, instead of the law separating Jews and Gentiles, God offered salvation apart from works of the law to both Jews and Gentiles. As Paul explained, Gentiles had become “fellow heirs (συγκληρονόμοι) and members of the body (σύσσωμα) and partakers (συμμέτοχοι) of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Eph 3:6).

Paul calls this “the mystery of Christ” (3:4; see also 3:3 and 3:9; cf. Romans 11:25–32 and Colossians 1:24–29). God had long kept it hidden (3:9), not revealing in the past as it was now (3:5). But, in Christ Jesus, God had now accomplished his eternal purpose (3:11). God was revealing his plan through the apostles and prophets by the Holy Spirit (3:5) to all humankind (3:9) and even to the spiritual “principalities and powers in the heavenly places” (3:10). Paul himself was a minister of this gospel (3:7), preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ to the Gentiles (3:8).

Notes for Preaching

As with other major festivals, Epiphany gives preachers the opportunity to review God’s plan and work of salvation and to draw their hearers into that account. Epiphany’s particular theme is the revelation to all nations of God’s reign and salvation through Jesus Christ.

A sermon based on this pericope could begin with the point that one can appreciate fully what this revelation to all nations means for us only when one understands to what “all” should be compared. In this case, the contrast is not “all or nothing,” as seems often to be thought. It is not “all or some,” either. It is “all or one.” Under the old covenant, when the law of Moses was in effect, there was “one nation under God”: Israel. The rest—the Gentiles—were aliens and strangers as far as life and salvation were concerned (Eph 2:11–12). And, if that had not changed, then most of us who call ourselves God’s people would have remained outsiders.

What happened? What changed? Those are the questions to address. The answer is, of course, Jesus. In his life, death, and resurrection, he brought an end to the old covenant, including the reign of the law, and he called for followers to be made of all nations—not just Israel (Mt. 28)—and sent apostles like Paul to all people (Eph 3:1)—not just Jews. Moreover, “what happened” is that the message and the promises of God came to us, in our time and place, and we have become “fellow heirs and members of the body and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Eph 3:6).

The sermon might conclude by asking “what now?” Here one could follow Paul himself, who urged the Ephesians to lead lives worthy of their calling (Eph 4:1) and to “walk as children of light” (Eph 5:8), not in darkness or ignorance (Eph 4:17–18; 5:8–11), which echoes the Old Testament lesson: “Rise, shine, for our light has come.”

Joel P. Okamoto