

The Mystery of Openness

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Pastor Scott Austin

artisanchurch.com

[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Ken Tryon]

The gospel reading this morning is from Matthew 2 verse one.

1 *In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:*

*6 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"*

7 *Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." 9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Thank you for that reading. So, we had the winter solstice recently. How many of you get excited for that day the way I do? I love the winter solstice. A couple of you have your hands up, I can tell that you do too. It's an important day for me because personally, the thing about

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winter that bums me out is not the cold. It's not the snow. It's not even the grey skies during the day - although that's a close second. It's the darkness that bums me out. It's the shortness of the days, and the LONGNESS - also known as length - of the nights. Longness? [laughs] I should really manuscript my sermon. But you know the feeling when in the winter, when you're driving somewhere at 5:30PM and it's pitch black out. I hate that. Isn't that... it's the worst. And I always just half to console myself - and I think half to torture myself - I think about that same hour during the summer and something I was doing during the summer at that time. And how it was bright and sunny when in July we had baseball practice at this exact time. It was bright and sunny and then, in fact, we didn't get home for 3 more hours and the sun was still up when we got there! We probably don't need to dwell too much on that because it would just depress us, but my point is: we had the solstice. Things are getting brighter. They are! It's just that it's happening *really really* slowly. Do you know that in Rochester today we will have one minute and 6 seconds more daylight than we had yesterday? Woo! Yes, keep telling yourself that. Tomorrow we will have one minute and 10 seconds more daylight than we had today. I don't know about you, but that is not quite fast enough for me. Still the promise of summer is real and I know that because, I am not as old as my children think I am, but I've been around long enough to see several winters. A few dozen of them, as a matter of fact. And I know for a fact that spring comes next. And that summer comes after that. That's why I wanted to start the service today with that song there will be a light. I always try to do that at the solstice, but I needed it today as well.

You know, as much as I really dislike the darkness I have come to see the seasonal shift as a gift. I'll tell you why. The light and darkness, it's a wonderful metaphor for the spiritual life. And the rhythms of it, particularly, are a wonderful metaphor for the spiritual life because it can be helpful to me to realize that whatever spiritual darkness I might be experiencing, and St John of The Cross called "the dark night of the soul" and if that phrase doesn't connect with you it's because you might not have had one yet. But some of you know that what that feels like, the dark night of the soul, and when you're experiencing something like that in your in your life, in your spiritual life, it can be really disorienting and quite terrifying, because you're not sure if it's ever going to end. And that that's what makes the seasonal shifts nice, because it gives me this framework for understanding that these cycles do happen, and that after the darkness comes the light. And after the night comes the morning, after the winter comes the spring. Consider the promise that was given to Israel through the prophet Isaiah which was our call to worship today. If you were here for the beginning of our service I read this text from Isaiah Chapter 60 that begins with these words: *Arise, shine for the light has come. The glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth and fixed darkness the peoples, but the Lord will arise upon you and His glory will appear over you.* Those words are reassuring when you are

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experiencing a spiritual darkness. Unfortunately, if you read through the passage a few more verses you come to a verse that I actually think tamps down the joy of these opening verses of this chapter, and I'll tell you why, because the words that come a few verses later are this: *Then you shall see and be radiant*. Can you guess which word I have a problem with in that sentence? *Then*. When it is *then*? Not now! Beyond that I could say. All I know about *then* is that it's not **now**. And I want relief **now**. I want light in my spiritual darkness **now**. I don't like waiting for *then*. I don't even like waiting for tomorrow! And as I've just told you I know to the second how much darkness is going to be before we get the sunrise! I can at least brace myself for the fact that no, it won't be light yet when you wake up tomorrow, but before long after you do it will be light. This idea of *then* you shall see and be radiant, the idea of waiting in the darkness for an indeterminate amount of time - that is not my idea of a good time. But for the people of Israel, and, as we'll see in a moment, for all of us, that light did shine out in the dark. And the moment that that prophecy "arise, shine, for your light has come" was made good was the moment of the birth of Jesus.

And this story from the Gospels that we just heard read a few minutes ago describes that in a beautiful way. It tells of the wise men from the east who came to visit Jesus in his earliest years, bringing him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. This is an event that the church knows as epiphany and by the way today is the Feast of Epiphany which doesn't always appear on a Sunday but it does this year, and this kicks off a whole season of epiphany. We're going to be in the season of epiphany - or, for the real snobby church nerds, "epiphanytide" - between now and the start of Lent. So this takes us through until March 3rd, and then we'll begin Lent and prepare for Easter. But the season of epiphany is kicked off with this story of wise men from the east, and that's because the word, apparently, in its Greek roots means "a multitude of camels."

[audience laughter, indistinct speech]

Not really. Good. It means "shine upon." But I don't know why this particular story is connected to the idea of epiphany, and that was somewhat confusing to me. Multitude of camels that's good. It's the idea of a light bulb appearing over your head. Of having a dawning, a revelation. And it's took me a while to figure out, to connect that, to the wiseman. Because although what Pastor Jesse said is absolutely true during the children's time, she talked with the kids about how they had "epiphanies" along the way on their journey they had the star appearing. It was kind of like, you know, a revelation, but then as they began to understand what it meant they had these other revelations. And then they had another epiphany in the form of the dream warning them to go home by another route and not return to King Herod. But there's a more obscure meaning for epiphany that we get from the story of the wise men in

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the east. And although it's obscure I actually think it's much more powerful on a much bigger scale.

The reason that the church calls this event epiphany and uses this event to start the season of epiphany where we look for the revelations of Jesus all around us is because this is the first moment when the Gospel of Jesus was revealed to Gentiles. In other words this is the first. Revelation of God, of the Gospel that goes beyond the family of the Israelites. The Jewish people, the descendants of Abraham. And that's the type of revelation that this event marks. Because these were not just any old wise men from the east. This is one of the things that's easy for us to miss, and there's many of them especially around the high holidays that are easy for us to miss because of the the way it has permeated popular culture. We've got the song "We Three Kings," you've got the California Raisins doing it! [pauses, laughs] Maybe I am old after all. You have the the nativity sets with everybody gathered around the manger - which is probably an anachronism - when it comes to them but we'll let that slide. You have the greeting cards - you all see this every Christmas, right? The greeting cards with the silhouette of the of the train of camels, right? It's all, just, there all the time! We don't think about the fact of who these people are and how radical it was that God revealed this mystery to them, because they were not Jewish. They were *very* not Jewish. They were *very* gentile they were Zoroastrians and they were Persian astrologers. They were as far outside the boundaries of what the people of Abraham, the family of Abraham, defined itself as as you could probably get in the known world at the time. And so it is a gigantically radical thing that God gave this revelation to those people. I preached a whole sermon on that last year I think, you can go listen to it if you care. So the whole point is that epiphany, for me, is a celebration of the revelation of God to the whole world. Not just to this one particular tribe or nation. But here's the thing about revelation. What do you need first before you can have a revelation? You have to have a mystery. What good is a solution without a question or a problem? What good is a revelation without a mystery?

And that brings us to the epistles reading that the lectionary gives us for today. This is the letter of Paul to the Ephesians and it comes from Ephesians chapter 3. If you'd like to follow along in a Bible with me as I read this you can find it on page 950 in these red Bibles which are in the seats. Or you can use your own Bible, or as I always say, if you Google it: "Ephesians 3" you'll get a version of it that's close enough. And what I want you to do, because this passage does talk extensively about mystery and revelation, is, I want you to count up in your head or on your fingers or by making a little mark on your bulletin, the number of times there's a word or phrase that signifies mystery or revelation or something similar to those words. Ok spoiler - it's

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a lot. Someone, I think somebody in the first service ran out of fingers. I'm pretty sure they had all of them too so. Ephesians 3, verses 1 through 12. Count up these mysteries or revelations.

1 This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— 2 for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, 3 and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, 4 a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. 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: 6 that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

7 Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. 8 Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, 9 and to make everyone see[c] what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; 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. 11 This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12 in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

So what is this mystery that has been revealed in Christ? First let me ask you how many did you get. Shout at a number. Seven, six, five, four? We're going the wrong way! There's a lot of them, right? It's chock-full, the whole passage, mystery and revelation. So what is it? What is the mystery? What is it that has been revealed? Well he says it quite plainly: that the Gentiles - that is to say the non Jews - now I want to do a little bit of demographic math for you. If you have a group of the Gentiles, and then a group of the Jews, that's everybody. Right. It's like people who are wearing plaid, and people who are not wearing plaid. That's all of us. So the gentiles have become fellow heirs to the promise of Abraham's ancestors that they - by which I mean I'm pretty confident looking around the room, we - are now members of that same body. We are now sharers in the same promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel. Hallelujah! Thanks be to God. Except that we screw it up like that [snaps fingers] fast.

Here's what we do. We act like the revelation of Jesus, the good news of Jesus, is that there used to be a closed system around the Jews. Around the descendants of Abraham, and that now in the Christian era, thanks be to God, that's no longer the case. Because God has replaced that old closed system with a *new* closed system! A new closed *Christian* system. He just swapped out one group of chosen people for another, and we are lucky enough to be in this circle this time. I have to tell you, though, that doesn't sound at all consistent with what Paul actually says in this text from Ephesians chapter 3. I actually want to read this again and I'm going to give you something else to listen for this time. The first time I asked you to listen for language about mystery and revelation and to count those up. This time I want you to listen for

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language about “all” or “every one.” Language that seems to widen the circle in one way or another. Maybe not just those literal, those those two specific words, but words that give you that idea. And in much of the Christian church we are sort of taught from the beginning not to read scripture with this perspective, or from this perspective, because we're part of that closed system and we kind of wanna keep it that way. And so this may actually be sort of uncomfortable for some of you if I ask you to listen as I read this passage and think about the idea of “all” and “everyone.” I want to do it anyway. Let me read it again and you can sort of do the same counting thing as before.

1 This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— 2 for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, 3 and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, 4 a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. 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: 6 that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

7 Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. 8 Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, 9 and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; 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. 11 This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12 in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

Did you catch all of that language about the boundless riches of Christ? About the call to make everyone see the wisdom of God in its rich variety? The mystery that Jesus reveals first to the wise men from the east and then to the apostles and prophets of the church, and eventually to all of us is that God is for all. The knowledge of God's mysteries, the power to be called children of the most high, the joy of receiving a special blessing from the creator of the universe so that we can in turn be a blessing to all those around us that is for all of us. Not just the all of us that encompasses this room, but all of us Jews and Gentiles. And here's maybe the most beautiful part of all: this is not a plan B. This was not the consolation prize. This was not God saying: “Religion! We're going to try something new!” This was in God's character and nature from the beginning. It was the plan all along. Paul says this is in accordance with the eternal purpose! So what if... what if the idea of that closed system around the people of Abraham was not the purpose of selecting them and blessing them. We know that wasn't the case anyway because right from the beginning, from the earliest calling, Abraham was told you're going to be blessed

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so that you can be a blessing. What if the the special gift that the church has received in the Gospel of Christ is not designed to give us a boundary by which we can define ourselves “in” and define others “out” but as a another version, another telling of that same blessing. What if it's the absolute culmination of what God was doing all along? How dare we screw that up and turn it into another little insular system?!

And I know that a lot of you were taught something similar to what I was taught about salvation, and you know it occurred to me as I was saying this in the first service that I do talk a lot about my religious upbringing and how, like, far I've grown from that. How much wiser I am now than I was. And it's not that I don't think I'm wiser - and I think by God's grace I am - but I do think it's important for you to know that I actually am extremely grateful for the the family of faith and community of faith though I was raised in. Even if, even given the fact that I've moved away from some of what I was sort of taught and what was implicit in those systems, it was a great gift. I want to be clear about that I was really fortunate and blessed to receive what I received. But part of what I received that I don't feel like was was a blessing was this idea that the purpose of salvation is to get your name crossed off the hell list and put over here on the heaven list. And I know that a lot of you in the room had that same, that same idea drilled into your head night after night. At least every Wednesday night, right? Some of you are nodding. I know you're there with me. But what if the point and nature of our spiritual salvation isn't to take our name off of one list and put it on another list any more than it was the point of the revelation of Jesus to go to take one closed system and replace it with another one. But what if, instead, the point of our salvation, the whole purpose of our salvation, the very nature of our salvation, is the healing of our souls. The recreation of our very beings. The erasure of our guilt. The commutation of our sentence. The end to our imprisonment, our adoption into a new family. What if it's the cleansing of all the mess that we've made of ourselves and our families and our communities? What if it's the transformation that does come from the renewing of our minds in the Holy Spirit? What if it's the power, maybe best of all, to join God in the divine work of making all things new? What if that's the mystery that Jesus reveals the solution to. That Jesus is the revelation about?

How would that change your understanding of salvation? How would that change your understanding of the mission of the church? How would it change your understanding of what your particular ministry should be in the world? How would it change your life? How would it change your understanding of the “dark night of the soul” that you might be experiencing right now? How would it change your ability to hope for the dawning of a new day in the world? In your heart? In your school or workplace? I think it's got the power to change all of those things, and he comes with a great hope. And I want to leave you with a word of hope from Anne Lamott, who someday might be Saint Anne, I don't know. She says “Hope begins in the dark.

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The stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and watch and work, you don't give up." And I will add to that the reason you wait and watch and work and don't give up is because God has not stopped working when the sun went down. God works overnight. God works a quadruple every day. And you may not see it because the darkness may be around you, but the darkness isn't you. It's just where you are, maybe, at the moment. And so may you have the joy and the hope that comes with the revelation of Jesus. The light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Let's pray together.

God thank you for this word of revelation from the story in the Gospels today. Thank you for beginning this work, for continuing this work, for renewing this work in us and around us and through us. May we be given the grace and privilege to see your revelation in the world around us. In our own lives may we see your light dawning on the horizon in the midst of the dark night of our soul. And may we be so emboldened and blessed and changed and transformed by that life that we can share it with the world around us. Bringing your light into the darkness not for the purpose of winning a contest. Not for the purpose of getting people to join our team, but for the purpose of bringing the good news of the gospel to anyone who needs it, and anyone who will listen. May we see the fruit of that effort in our time we pray through Christ our Lord amen.

We're going to conclude the service in a few minutes here. We'll sing a couple more songs together. You can get your children if they're in the classrooms now. Our communion table will be open. Our response to the proclamation of the word of God is always to come and receive the sacraments of Holy Communion: the Body and Blood of the Savior. And Artisan's table is open to all who are seeking to follow Jesus. You need not be a member of any particular church. This is the table not of the church but of the Lord. So if you like to come and receive it you can take a piece of the bread and dip it in one of the cups, eat it right at the table, and may it be for you the Body and Blood of the Savior. May it be food for your hungry soul. May it be an act of unity with each other and with Christians around the world. And may it be an act of remembrance of Christ's great sacrifice for you and for the forgiveness of the sins of the world. Once again there will be a member the prayer team at the back of the room if you'd like to receive prayer please go and find them. Our table is open, let's sing together and continue to worship God. Amen.

[end of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at ArtisanChurch.com