

REFLECTION FOR EPIPHANY 2021
Diocese of Maryland Clergy & Senior Warden Gathering
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Ephesians 3:1-12

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles-- for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. 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: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. 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. 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, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; 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. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

Good morning. I'd like to begin with a prayer, offered every Sunday at Epiphany Church Odenton following Communion.

*O God, the Father of all, guide us into the ways of peace.
Lead us from prejudice to truth; deliver us from hatred, cruelty,
violence, and mean spiritedness; Fill us with generosity, hospitality
and love, and in your good time, enable us all to stand reconciled
before you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

I suppose we are all glad that the Christmas season is behind us—and 2020 is in the rear view mirror. People are back at work and children are back in school—even if they are working and schooling from home. The wider society has moved past the holidays. But, not so fast. We celebrated the First Mystery—the Incarnation of God in Christ, *God with us and God for us!* But now comes a Second Mystery and a Season that doesn't seem to get as much attention. The

Second Mystery takes more time and the journey is harder. This Second Mystery is what Paul writes about from prison to the people of Ephesus.

The Gospel of Matthew signals the Second Mystery—when the Magi, the Wise Men, three strangers come from afar—trekked over a long distance, presumably on their camels, relentlessly en route to witness and honor the First Mystery—the birth of the Christ Child. At Epiphany, we remember these “long-haulers.” Across deserts, mountains, rivers—traveling with a whole camel train of people—no distance or inconvenience is too great for the “long-haulers.” Not even Herod and the politics of the day detour them for very long.

The term “long-haulers” used to refer to truckers, 1.8 million of them hauling 71% of America’s freight. A 21st-century camel train, bringing goods cross country. Now, during the COVID pandemic, a new group has earned the title: COVID “long-haulers” are people who after a normal recovery discover that they are still dealing with symptoms that do not go away—for weeks, months, no one knows how long. We are all watching, waiting, to learn more about this pandemic that has stopped the world in its tracks. “Long haulers.” For us God lovers, Epiphanytide requires that we become “long-haulers.” For this Second Mystery is what Paul hints at, in the first chapter to the Ephesians, and describes explicitly in the second chapter.

Gentiles, those formerly separated from God, are now included in Christ.

In simple language, the Second Mystery is a conversion of the heart and action, from Exclusivity to Inclusivity. Who would guess that Inclusivity should be such a great offense. Paul is in prison because he keeps bringing it up. But Paul is not deterred. Paul is undaunted. Paul is a “long-hauler.” Paul calls it— “the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things.” Preaching the *Inclusion of All* in

God's eternal plan is what Paul is called to do. And what Paul continues to do no matter who objects.

I was raised to see exclusiveness as something to be admired. Even to be revered. Being better than others. Having more than others. Exclusivity. I wonder if you were, too. But embraced by Christ, Paul changes the goals. Being embraced by Christ, changes us, makes us *members of the same body, and joyful sharers in the promise* of God's riches, not our own. It's the Second Mystery that gives Paul's entire life and calling purpose and power. It is what gives Paul his confidence and boldness. It is what gives Paul energy. Paul is an enthusiast. Even an enthusiastic prisoner! Paul is a "long-hauler." Paul writes,

*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.*

He can't be silenced.

*There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female,
for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal. 3:28)*

As I look out at your faces I realize that I don't know many of you. Most of the people I began ministry with are no longer with us. I was ordained in 1977—before some of you, many of you were born! I've seen this diocese through 44 years of ordination. Served with 4 or 9 bishops, depending on how you count. I've been an assistant and associate and a rector. I've been on just about every committee and commission. Been to General Convention five times. Served on a National Commission. I'm a "long-hauler." I'm still working full-time and expect to continue, probably like my husband, into my 80s.

I'm a "long-hauler" because the Second Mystery excites me. The first time I went to General Convention, I saw a diverse, indigenous church—unlike the one I grew up in. Native Americans. Hispanics. Black. White. Gay. Straight. Rich. Poor. Rural. Urban. And I heard differing perspectives from people with different experiences. I was excited to be part of such a Church. It gave my life and calling substance and purpose. But it wasn't until D. Min. classmates at Virginia Seminary expressed curiosity about the 50/50 diversity at Epiphany Church Odenton that I realized Epiphany was different, I was surprised. And I discovered that there are 350,000 congregations of faith in the United States and that fewer than 5% are multiracial. (Multiracial is defined as no one group is 80%.) I wept. I wept, because of the numbers, but I also wept because I had taken my own people for granted. I took them for granted and I took myself for granted. And I wept because I believe that there are no excuses good enough for not embracing diversity in our own lives and in the life of each congregation.

Imagine—of the 350,000 congregations in the U.S, imagine if not 5%, but 30% were multiracial. What if 50% or even 60% were multiracial? If we were a truly a Second Mystery Church the social fabric of this country would change overnight through something as ordinary as friendship, long-lasting friendships. God has already put 350,000 congregations in place! Households of God just waiting to be agents of social and spiritual transformation. What this "long-hauler" has learned is that to embrace and be part of "*the rich variety*," as Paul calls it, is the very *grace we have received*. How do we do it? Well, who are your friends? Who do you go to the movies with? Who do you have dinner with? Whose lives do you share? Through whose eyes do you see the world? Who are the people in your community of faith?

I'm a "long-hauler" because it feel so good! With it comes an abundance of excitement and adventures, forgiveness and knowledge, truth and lots of grace. I love the people in the camel train with whom I've become life-long friends.

“Long-haulers.” Others may look at us and wonder why we do what we do. Why “long-haulers” seem to have limited ourselves. Why we don’t look more ambitious. “Why don’t you retire and be done with this?” they ask. “Break out. Do something fun!” “This is fun,” I say. “This is really, really fun. Deeply fun.” As a matter of personal privilege, I’d like to introduce you to a fellow traveler who has been with me for about 40 years. He’s been part of every Christmas at Epiphany and has made cameo appearances at other congregations as well. He’s a “long-hauler” also. He’s been waiting here, patiently. And he’s here to remind us of our mission—to travel the long and arduous road together, with boldness and confidence—gathering strangers along the way, and sharing

*the boundless riches of Christ, that everyone might see
the mystery of love hidden for ages in God who created
all things.*



He’s a “long-hauler,” too.

Thank you. Amen.