

**Ephesians 3:2-12**

December 25, 2006 – CHRISTMAS DAY

**Christmas Brings Us to God**† **In freedom (vv.2-6,12)**† **In confidence (vv.7-12)**

In the name of Jesus Christ, our newborn Gift from God above, dear rejoicing Christians:

If this were Christmas, 1918, it would be very hard for any of us to smile or see each other's faces. The federal government had ordered everyone to wear what today we call "particle masks" in a desperate attempt to stop the influenza virus brought back from the War in Europe by a Minnesota soldier. Nothing worked. For ten months the disease ravaged from coast to coast until it had claimed over 550,000 Americans, and 30 million worldwide. The deadliest months of September and October devoured so many caskets that undertakers had to hire armed guards in order to protect their stock. The masks were about as effective as chicken wire in a dust storm. Barely in time for Armistice Day, November 11, 1918, the pandemic finally began to ease up. Still today no one knows exactly why, except that maybe the virus ran out of susceptible victims. Two things amaze me about that pandemic: How scientists never saw the virus because it was too small for microscopes back then, and how quickly Americans forgot.

Sometimes frustrated Christians wish God would do something to get people's attention. God has, many times. But our memories erase as much pain as possible and go back to singing, "Happy Days Are Here Again," roaring on into the Twenties, Nineties or a new millennium. Natural disasters just seem too natural. But God is love. And God's love found a better way. God came down to us as Gift to strip tragedy and death of power and grant to us eternal peace with Him. The first Christmas brought God to us. And ever since then, **Christmas Brings Us to God**. God got our attention. Celebrate first of all...

† **In freedom (vv.2-6,12)**

Have you noticed that every year about this time a bunch of scholars start popping up like mice from a wood pile? Each one is all excited to put out what claims to be a new theory, but it sounds a bit like something you heard five or six years ago. Or was that last year? They're just so convinced that backwards country folk made up the Christmas story. Yet they don't realize they're more afraid of Nativity Scenes than another influenza outbreak. Don't secular humanists have anything else to do? They call radio stations explaining that talk about "god" is okay, "But don't mention Jesus Christ." Somehow their arrogant sophistication seems convinced that since we have electron microscopes to see tiny viruses and telescopes for distant galaxies, we can find our own way through time and eternity.

Before we start clucking in agreement like a gaggle of geese, maybe we should stop and think about this. All of us were once chained in that dark prison of doubt and depressing unbelief. Many still are today. So was the Apostle Paul, long before the Roman authorities first chained him under house arrest in Rome. Paul could remember his days as Saul, the raging Pharisee, self-righteous in his quest to stamp out Christmas, one Christian martyr at a time. Back then Saul was wearing a mask of his own making which kept him as safe as a particle mask from influenza. Saul did not realize any more than so many Americans today that he was hard on his way to hell – until the Christ of God got his attention.

When Paul writes to the Ephesians, he is physically a prisoner, but his spirit is soaring **In freedom**. You see, Paul has been to the manger. He has knelt beside the greatest Gift our God could ever give in the Gift of His one and only begotten Son, "*full of grace and truth.*" (John 1:14) Can't you sense Paul trembling with delight like a child who just opened his favorite present? He has to tell all his cousins and friends: "*Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly.*" That's like

saying, “Your scientists will never see this under a microscope or find it gazing out into space. But God gave me the key to the *“mystery”* of eternal life. **In freedom** from death He wants you to have it too.”

In the manger again this Christmas, we see what God was revealing through His converted servant Paul, not just to his fellow Jews, but to us non-Jews, whom he calls *“heirs.”* Did you catch that? *“In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.”*

If we could see death stalking our cities, people might try making medicine again as in 1918, on the stove with sugar and turpentine. But isn’t that what we Americans are doing by saying “Happy Holidays” in order to avoid the Christ of Christmas? Christmas means more than “Happy Hanukah” for the Jews. God wants all of them too, and He gives us Gentiles an equal inheritance of eternal life. Christmas sets us free from the prison of guilt and unbelief, arrogance, false and foolish pride, selfish lust for worldly pleasures. We cannot remove sin ourselves any better than scientists could stop influenza from attacking especially strong, virile soldiers. But **Christmas Brings Us to God.** Can you come...?

### † **In confidence (vv.7-12)**

If you could see some of the survivors still alive from Christmas, 1918, the pain is still in their eyes for a mother lost, a baby brother who died with your name on his tiny lips, a boy who could not find his friends at home when their sad parents kept saying, “Ask your mother. She’ll tell you.” Some say the joy never came back to their families. Others confess through tears that 1918 taught them we are all vulnerable; no one is safe. One scientist admitted that he would never again declare man’s ability to conquer all disease. We met our match but we could not keep the lesson in our collective memory.

The Apostle Paul, however, would never forget. Far worse than the cries of pain and anguish he caused so many Christians was the sorrow he knew he made for Christ by not believing He was the Messiah foretold by the ancient Jewish Scriptures of the Old Testament. When he finally discovered the truth, Paul never forgot how foolish he had been and how good and gracious God truly is. When **Christmas Brings Us to God In confidence**, we look back at what our lives have been with a forgiven, peaceful sense of amazement at how God has treated us the opposite of what we deserved.

There is no bitterness here, only Christmas joy and **confidence** in the pen of this prisoner Paul: *“I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power.”* “Grace” is God’s underserved love which builds us up **In confidence** more than anything we could ever do by our works or merits, our personal sacrifices or even a thousand deaths in hell. Paul keeps celebrating: *“Although I am less than the least of all God’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.”*

Some of you may know that our congregation was asked by public health officials to prepare an appropriate response to the next pandemic. Ever since 9/11, the possibility appears more real and frightening than ever not as a matter of “if,” but “when” it strikes again. Now it’s our turn. *“The administration of this mystery”* in the manger, *“hidden in God”* who hung on the cross, and *“created”* in Easter’s new life of our Baptism, God wants to be *“made known”* again *“through the church”* to this generation. Will it take another Christmas 1918 or another “9/11” to get people’s attention? Should we wait to see? Ask the children if next week would be okay for opening their presents. Ask the sick at heart whether they want to wait for comfort and peace. Ask the diseased and dying if they want to wait for a cure. **Christmas Brings Us To God.** Today’s the day to tell. Amen.