

USE YOUR WORDS

SHERARD EDINGTON

Ephesians 3:1-12

In 1982, a professor in the English Department at San Jose State University started a contest. It is a literary event called the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest. It is named after the English writer Edward George Bulwer-Lytton. The contest is tongue-in-cheek and the challenge is to compose opening sentences to the worst of all possible novels. Bulwer-Lytton is the author of the novel Paul Clifford, a book that famously begins with the words, “It was a dark and stormy night.” Let me read the entire opening sentence of that novel:

“It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents, except at occasional intervals, when it was checked by a violent gust of wind which swept up the streets (for it is in London that our scene lies), rattling along the housetops, and fiercely agitating the scanty flame of the lamps that struggled against the darkness.”

Each year, entrants in the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest try to outdo one another in composing the most turgid of prose. They are almost always humorous and usually in a dark way. The only rule is that each entry must consist of a single sentence.

An aspiring bad author can submit to the contest under one of several categories. In 2018, a woman from Katy, Texas, received an honorable mention with this entry in the detective category. (I really liked this one.) She writes:

“I knew that dame was trouble as soon as I set eyes on her, see: there was a stain on her clingy dress, wine, difficult to get out (you notice these things when you’ve been in the business as long as I have); there was a piece of gum stuck to the bottom of her high heel, cherry, that would leave a gristly pink trail following her every step (you pick up on these things when you are as experienced as I); and when she coolly asked me directions to the detective’s office, I pointed her down the hall and went back to mopping the floor.”

Turgid prose is writing that by definition is “excessively embellished in style or language: bombastic, pompous”. Turgid prose is overwritten—more than the reader wants or needs. In layman’s terms, it’s just bad writing.

An argument can be made that our scripture reading for today would qualify for the Bulwer-Lytton Contest. Did you hear what I just read? Could you follow it? Did you notice that I read extremely slowly, taking long pauses at the ends of phrases, trying to break up the painfully lengthy sentences into manageable ideas? To be honest, even while reading it aloud, my mind wondered. There’s simply too much

there to process. This prose is not turgid, but it is dense. The ideas proposed in that passage could fill a Bible. In fact, one scholar suggests that the entirety of the New Testament can be found in this passage. And I believe he is correct.

Tomorrow, January 6, is the Day of Epiphany. It is the much-acclaimed Twelfth Day of Christmas. While the rest of the world has moved on from Christmas, Christians celebrate a Christmas season which does not begin until December 25. At my house, we use this extended Christmas as a lazy excuse to leave up the lights.

The Day of Epiphany is an ancient feast day observed in the church since the fourth century. At Epiphany, the church celebrates the wonder of God becoming manifest in the person of Jesus Christ, who lived on earth among us. In other words, it takes us about two weeks to process the idea of what happened at Christmas, that God-in-the-flesh came into the world to all people—Jews and Gentiles. The church looks to the story of the magi, the wisemen, as the first non-Jews to worship the Christ-child. This moment was when the world took notice of what had happened in Israel.

The word we find throughout our reading for today is the word *mystery*. Mystery fits the day of Epiphany because an epiphany is a manifestation of something. Something is revealed. In this case, what is revealed has been a mystery. As Paul puts it, a mystery *hidden for ages*.

In English, when we use this word epiphany, we usually mean “a sudden rush of realization,” such as, “I just had an epiphany”—an understanding, a comprehension. For Paul, the epiphany of Christ is that Christ is savior for all—not just Jews, and not just Gentiles, but all people.

Paul writes this letter to the church in Ephesus from prison where he has been locked up for preaching the gospel. Paul grieves that he cannot be with his people in person, but he sends this letter. And in this letter, he puts everything. We find it all. Paul has only his words to send, and he uses them.

In this passage Paul tells of God’s trustworthiness over time, experienced and enacted in ways that could not be predicted or anticipated. He tells of God’s generosity in giving—God gives all for us. Paul tells of God’s commitment to create reliable leaders and re-create us as bold speakers of truth. Paul tells of the presence of Christ and the reality of the savior.

There are huge themes to be discovered in this passage, themes too large for us to cover today. I could spend months dissecting these words, but I won’t. I will, however, challenge you to spend time reading and reflecting on Paul’s words. There is nothing here that you can’t comprehend if you just take the time.

But I want to end with what we read in the second half of the passage. Here, Paul talks about how through God's grace, he was called to be a servant of the gospel. We know Paul's story, how he was transformed from being a persecutor of the church to becoming its greatest advocate. Still, he remains humble calling himself *the very least of all the saints*. His call from God is to bring to Jews and Gentiles *the news of the boundless riches of Christ, to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages*. He is called to do this *so that through the church, the wisdom of God... might now be made known*.

And there is where I want to leave us today. Here at the start of a new year, as we consider the Epiphany of Christ being made known to all the world, that we as a church re-claim God's calling to us to demonstrate the gospel to all people. During this season of Epiphany, let us renew our commitment to be disciples of Jesus Christ sharing the gospel not just with those who know it but with those who don't. Yes, there are people who have not heard of Jesus' gospel of love and compassion, of hope and salvation. That is the gospel we can share. In this coming year, let us commit to telling the world of the great joy of Christ's love that we experience each and every day. Let us share the mystery.