

**More Than We Can Ask or Imagine
Reflections on the Epiphany**

**RCL Epiphanyⁱ
4 January 2026**

**Saint Helen's Anglican Church
Vancouver BC**

In April of 2023 my family spent a week in the old city of Cartagena in Colombia attending a family wedding. Cartagena is one of the oldest European-settler cities in the Americas with most of the buildings in the walled old city dating back to the early 1700's if not earlier. The streets are narrow and houses are built very close together, sometimes even sharing walls. Often the only distinguishing feature between one home and another is a painted door with a distinctive brass door knocker. What lies behind the door remains unknown, a mystery revealed only to those who enter.

For example, the door into the house where we stayed brought us into a home with its own art gallery, small swimming pool in the open-air atrium and a dining room and kitchen sheltered by the floor above but open to the cooling air flow from the atrium. It was beautiful; it is beautiful, but you would never guess what lay inside from what is visible from the street.

In Cartagena you can catch a glimpse of what the urban world of the writer of the Letter to the Ephesians experienced. The ancient cities of the Mediterranean world also had narrow streets with houses built close together or adjoining. Only their doors opened out onto the streets; few if any had windows on the street-side of the house. To know what lay inside, one needed to be invited in

and then the plan, the design, the quality of the house would become apparent. The English word ‘mystery’ comes from *mystērion*, a word in ancient Greek which has as one of its meanings ‘the concealed interior plan of a house’.ⁱⁱ One explores a *mystērion*; one delves into it, peeling away its layers like an onion only to realize that the onion is getting bigger not smaller. We discover that faith is always seeking understanding and that questioning is a sign of maturity.

“In former generations [the mystery of Christ] was not made known to humankind,’ writes the author of the Letter to the Ephesians, “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.”ⁱⁱⁱ For the first followers of Jesus, all Jews, it came as a great surprise that non-Jews, peoples whom many Jews considered to be strangers at best, enemies as worst, began to embrace the good news of God in Jesus. This is not what the Jewish believers expected to see when they entered through the door into the household of faith in Jesus. It was as unexpected as seeing a Muslim immigrant wresting a weapon from the hands of a terrorist targeting Jews on Bondi Beach. It does not fit the ‘narrative’, the story, we have come to believe is being lived out in our world.

But the author of the Letter goes one step further. Not only is the mystery of God in Christ made known in the growth of Gentile believers, but the church, the followers of Jesus, is the agent through whom this mystery is spread throughout the world in order “ . . . 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.”^{iv} My friends, to many people in the world today, the good news of God in Christ is like one of the houses on the narrow streets of Cartagena. People see the various doors, some of those doors painted in lively colours with fancy door knockers, but they do not know what is behind the beautiful colours and fanciful designs. The only way that they will know is if one of us, the disciples of Jesus, open the door and invite them in to explore “the wisdom of God in its rich variety”.

Among all that I believe about what it means to follow Jesus, I share this with you: People come into the household of faith when they are invited. I know that many Anglicans freeze when they hear the word ‘evangelism’. It conjures up images of slick TV preachers who would fit right at home as the cast of programs such as ‘The Price Is Right’ or something on one of the shopping channels. To be sure, many of our neighbours and friends are equally unlikely to respond to these hucksters. But our reticence to invite people to step across the threshold and into our midst is an opportunity that is missed more frequently than I dare to say.

If they were to cross our threshold, they may join us in our life-long exploration of the mystery of God made known in Jesus of Nazareth. For example, in a world where many people ask, ‘Why do bad things happen to good people?’, we might share that this is not the most helpful question. The more helpful question is ‘What do good people do when bad things happen?’ The first question can lead to despondency and even hopelessness; the second leads us into self-examination and a commitment to renewed vision of God’s future for us and for our communities.

If they were to cross our threshold, they could join us in acknowledging that, as Paul writes in I Corinthians, “For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love.”^v We live in what is sometimes called ‘the already but not yet’ of God’s reign of peace and justice. In Jesus we have seen the embodiment of that reign. Through the Spirit we are empowered in this in-between time the power to do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.^{vi}

One of my favourite prayers comes from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, the worship book of our sisters and brothers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. For me it is a prayer for all seasons, but it feels right for such a time as this in the life of this congregation, of our church and of our world. It is a prayer that is prayer rooted in the *mystērion* of Christian discipleship. It is a prayer that beckons us to open the door to discover what God is doing for us, with us and in us to reveal the glory of God in human lives.

Let us pray.

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**^{vii}

ⁱ Isaiah 60.1-6; Psalm 72.1-7, 10-14 (BAS); Ephesians 3.1-12; Matthew 2.1-12.

ⁱⁱ I am grateful to my colleague, the Rev'd Rick Fabian, sometime Rector of Saint Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco, for this observation made to me many years ago.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ephesians 3.5-6 (NRSVue).

^{iv} Ephesians 3.9-10 (NRSVue).

^v I Corinthians 13.12-13 (NRSVue).

^{vi} Ephesians 3.20 as paraphrased in *The Book of Alternative Services* 1985, 214.

^{vii} *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2006), 317.