

Advent Worship Series: The Bright Star of Bethlehem
First Sunday of Advent: Star of Creation

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD
November 31, 2013

Readings: Psalm 19: 1-6; Colossians 1: 15-20; John 1: 1-14

This sermon is an edited version of one prepared by Tim Runtsch for this series

The Holy Scriptures begin with these words: *“In the beginning God created the heavens and earth“* (Genesis 1:1).

In the beginning, there was just God ... and God alone. God is the one that brought everything else into being. The Creator brought forth creation. God spoke it and it was so. As it says in Hebrews chapter 11: *“By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.“* (Hebrews 11:3).

It is interesting to note that the first thing that God brought forth was light. Genesis 1 says: *“And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light ‘day,’ and the darkness he called ‘night.’ And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day”* (Genesis 1:3-5).

In the beginning light shattered darkness...and that light was good. It was very good!

As we know, humans were brought forth as the pinnacle of God’s creation. They were to care for creation and tend to it. It’s use was a gift to them from God.

In John chapter 1 we read that Jesus was right there at the very beginning of creation: *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all people”* (John 1:1-4).

Yes, the Son of God was right there in the beginning. *“Through him all things were made.”* And, *“in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible... He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”* (Colossians 1:16-17).

But then, not all that long into the life of God's creation, darkness entered the world in a whole new way. When our first ancestors fell into sin, the curse of this new darkness entered our existence. The darkness seemed to win out when sin entered our world. And human beings came to be comfortably at home in this darkness. As the Gospel of John declares: *"People loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil"* (John 3:19).

Now if I was God, I guess I would have looked at my creation and been utterly disappointed. And, in my utter disappointment, I probably would have wiped that creation away.

But not God.

God was not going to let the darkness hold sway. God was not going to let the darkness win the day. And so God launched a plan. God's plan was to once again shatter the darkness with God's own glorious light. Darkness was not going to win out. God would make sure of that.

It was into the darkness of the earth's night that a new light dawned and people took notice. It must have been a brilliant light, indeed. Sages, Magi, Wise Men saw this star from afar and followed where it led.

And where it led them was to a place called Bethlehem. That star was the star of creation. What does that old favorite hymn say?: *Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

But when they finally arrived in Bethlehem after their long journey, the Wise Men found out that the true star of creation was not the one shining in the sky. The true star was the child they found within a home there in Bethlehem. They saw something extraordinary in this child ---- God's own light. The Gospel of Matthew records: *"On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh"* (Matthew 2:11).

In a humble act of worship, those Wise Men offered the Lord some beautiful gifts from God's own creation. Just as we do when we offer the Creator gifts of the Lord's own creation in worship and praise and thanksgiving.

It is right here and right now that we must note that God, the One who tossed the stars into the skies, the One who whirled the planets in their proper orbits, the One who by fingers formed the mountains and fashioned the seas, the One who created all living creatures and breathed life into them, this very same God entered God's own creation. And not only that, God's very self in Jesus became a created being. It is marvel and mystery and true. The Lord of all was born of a woman at a specific time and in a specific place. The name of that place? Bethlehem.

G.K. Chesterton once said, "It has never been quite enough to say that God is in heaven and all is right with the world; since the rumor is that God had left his heavens to set it right."

That was Jesus' mission, to enter the darkness of our world and set things right again. No longer would darkness hold sway. No longer would darkness seem to overcome the light. Jesus, the bright star of Bethlehem, the star of creation, had entered the world. The Creator came to redeem his creation.

And that's exactly what Jesus did when he entered creation itself. He came to redeem it, to set it all right again. His perfect life, his sacrificial death, his victorious resurrection were all about setting things right again. And when Jesus died on the cross because he would not become party to the darkness of sin and he was raised from the grave, he ushered in a whole new creation. The stranglehold of darkness and death were shattered.

You see, Jesus' redemption of all creation is not just about making life in creation a bit more bearable. Nor is it merely an act of rescuing human bodies and souls out of the evil of this created world into a heavenly, eternal realm. When Jesus rose from the grave, a

whole new order of creation was ushered in.

And this work of redeeming all creation was inaugurated in that little town of Bethlehem. The apostle John writes, *“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth”* (John 1:14).

When the Word became flesh, when the glorious star of creation shined brightly in Bethlehem, it was a glorious light indeed...filled with grace and packed with truth. That grace and truth are God’s redeeming power at work.

And you and I have the joy and privilege to join in this all-important redeeming work of God today.

In the little town of Bethlehem today there is a small but significant band of Lutheran Christian believers. *Christmas Lutheran Church* is its name. The pastor of that church for the last 25 or so years has been a visionary man named Mitri Raheb. Pastor Raheb has written the following, “When Christians today sing ‘O Little Town of Bethlehem’ they seldom think of the real city with the real people. When it comes to Bethlehem and to Christmas, Christianity has become so spiritualized and so commercialized....But what happened in Bethlehem 2000 years ago was something real” [*Bethlehem: Then and Now*” by Mitri Raheb].

Bethlehem today is a city much different than the days of Jesus. In the first century, there were probably 800 to a 1,000 people in Bethlehem. Now it is a city of tens of thousands of people. All of these people, including a goodly number of our fellow Christians, live in a sort of captivity behind a Berlin-like wall. Bethlehem today can feel like a cramped, dark and dismal place. And, due to the situation, there are few places to experience the wonder and beauty of God’s creation.

So, it may seem a rather simple thing to us that the pastor and people of Christmas Lutheran Church wanted to build a playground for children with grass and trees. But in

Bethlehem, that's a big deal. It truly is an act of redemption in action. For in the midst of all that chaos and confusion that marks life in modern day Bethlehem, this church offers a place for people to experience the wonder of God's creation. That's the star of creation shining through...today.

When some Christians visited Bethlehem recently and witnessed this small park-like setting, they heard Mitri Raheb remark... "We have redeemed this land. Here the children of Bethlehem can once again gather and play and experience a small piece of God's creation."

The Gospel of John celebrates the fact that the light of Christ shining through cannot be overcome: "*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it*" (John 1:5). That Biblical truth is just as true today as it ever was. In the midst of darkness, the light of the star of creation shines brightly today. It cannot be overcome!

Mitri Raheb also has written: "The good news is this: God came into no other than this troubled, wounded and real world. He is real and wants to enter into our real world with all its complexities and fears. Christmas is real. It is not a myth... The Gospel is that God became one of us, one like us. He came as a child, vulnerable, and weak...Christmas is God's promise to us that we will have life, peace, and a future" [*Bethlehem: Then and Now* by Mitri Raheb].

As we begin this season called Advent, we remember that there are really three Advents we consider when it comes to Jesus.

There is, of course, his first Advent when he became a human child in Bethlehem.

The second Advent is the current one we celebrate today. It is being realized right here and right now. He comes to us today in his Word and in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. How he comes to us where two or three are gathered in his name.

But there is also an Advent to look forward to...that is when Jesus will come again as victorious Lord of all. When Jesus comes again, he will restore all things. We are longing

for that day. N.T. Wright's put it this way: *"The whole creation, the entire cosmos, is on tiptoe with expectation for God's glory to be revealed to his children."* (paraphrase of Rom. 8:21)

When Jesus comes again, he will be the bright star of creation in a whole new way. It's described so beautifully, so poetically in the 21st chapter of Revelation: *Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God ... He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new! ... I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp"* (verses 2-5, 22-23) What a glorious day that will be! Jesus, making all things new, will shine brightly as the star of his new creation.

But, until Jesus comes again, we have work to do. It is the work of redemption. It is the joyful task of reflecting the bright star of creation into the darkness of our current world, so that people may experience the light of Christ and come to the brightness of his dawn.

Shine, Jesus, shine! Shine today as the star of creation! Let us notice your light. Let us recognize your presence in our everyday. And, please, Jesus, shine through us that other may know you, our glorious star of creation. Amen.

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