

Advent Worship Series: The Bright Star of Bethlehem

Third Sunday of Advent: Star of Joy

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

December 22, 2013

Readings: Isaiah 61: 1-3; Philipians 4: 4-9; Luke 1: 39-56

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

This is the season of singing. I'm not just talking about the Christmas carols we hear and sing. I'm speaking of the people in the first chapters of St. Luke's gospel. Elizabeth sings when Mary arrives for a visit at her home. Mary responds with her own song of wonder and praise. The angels will sing to lowly shepherds on the occasion of Jesus' birth. Simeon will sing when Jesus is brought to the temple. Though the story is full of scandal and potential danger, it seems everyone is singing. An elderly couple has a son when they are beyond childbearing age. A virgin is pregnant by the Holy Spirit. The Son of God is born in humble surroundings and will be threatened by the savage, ego-maniac King Herod. Still those who have placed their trust in God's Word and love, are singing.

That star that shined so brightly over Bethlehem...it was a star of creation, it was a star of hope, it was a star of unity, but it was also a star of joy. What is this joy?

A favorite Christian author for many people is C.S. Lewis. Known to his friends and family as "Jack", Lewis was a novelist, poet, lay theologian, and Christian apologist. Born in Belfast, Ireland, he would go on to hold academic positions at both Oxford and Cambridge Universities. He was a good friend of J.R.R. Tolkien, who wrote The Hobbit and Lord of the Rings Trilogy. Lewis himself wrote The Chronicles of Narnia, Mere Christianity and The Screwtape Letters. But one of his most powerful books is entitled Surprised by Joy, Lewis' autobiography of his conversion from atheist to Christian. In the book he tells how indeed he was surprised by joy when he came to know of the love and grace and mercy of Jesus Christ.

Early on in the book he write: ...it is that of an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it Joy, which is a technical term and must be

sharply distinguished both from Happiness and Pleasure. Joy (in my sense) has indeed one characteristic, and one only, in common with them; the fact that anyone who has experienced it will want it again. ...I doubt whether anyone who has tasted joy would ever, if both were in his power, exchange it for all the pleasure in the world.”

In Surprised by Joy Lewis made clear that he had finally found the object of real joy and it was Jesus. Joy was not found in a “religion” or a “philosophy,” but in a person.

The prophet Isaiah foretold that the Messiah would be a joy-bringer, that he would transform the world, that he would transform lives. Isaiah declared (Isaiah 61:1-3): “The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor... to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.” True joy, found in Jesus, the child of Bethlehem, changes everything — changes **us** by giving us something that can’t be taken away.

As Lewis tried to explain, the joy that is found in our Lord is different from happy, giddy, or pleasure. The joy that is our gift from the Holy Spirit, is an **orientation of the heart**. Unlike happiness and pleasure, joy is not connected to circumstances. It’s anchored in God’s promise and character. This joy is deep — a core of confidence and hope that events and conditions can not rob from you. It’s rooted in the unshakable knowing that eternal life is ours not because of our goodness but because of God’s. Joy come from knowing no matter what happens, no matter what we may feel, we are not abandoned or unloved, for God is faithful... Jesus has hold of us. Joy is our anchor even when we may feel swamped with grief, fear or regret

Dr. Mitri Raheb is a Palestinian Christian who has lived most all his life in Bethlehem.

He was born there. He grew up there. After attaining his theological education in Germany, he could have lived and worked in Europe or the U.S. in relative safety. But he decided to return back the Holy Land and to his hometown. In 1988 he became the pastor of the very church that had been his childhood spiritual home, Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem. Throughout his lifetime in that place, there has been nearly constant war and rumors of war. Mitri has experienced ten wars firsthand. That's about one every five years.

In his book Bethlehem Besieged, Mitri writes the following...“As Palestinians, we're used to telling only the story of our suffering. However, the story of our successes and hopes needs to be told as well. It's not good to simply depress our friends day and night, for we all need moments of being uplifted and charged with new strength. We've been conditioning ourselves to run a hundred yards, but we are in fact in a marathon. Our struggle is neither easy nor short, and we have to condition ourselves for the long challenge ahead. We need moments of joy and hope in the midst of all this hopelessness. Otherwise, we won't be able to continue our journey” [p.123].

Indeed, those living in the challenged and troubled little town of Bethlehem do need moments of joy and hope in the midst of their hopeless situation. But if that is true for them, it is also true for all of us.

Jesus knew that. Whenever he tried to prepare his disciples for his likely death, he would reassure them that he would not be leaving them alone. In John's gospel Jesus says, *“In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me.”* Some of his disciples said to one another, *“What does he mean by saying, ‘In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me,’ and ‘Because I am going to the Father?’”* They kept asking, *“What does he mean by ‘a little while’? We don't understand what he is saying.”* Jesus goes on to say (John 16:22) : *“So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take*

away your joy.” Jesus speaks the truth that when we see him again, joy will be a dominant aspect of our forever life in Christ. When Jesus, born in Bethlehem and crucified at Calvary, comes again in glory and power and majesty, joy eternal will be ours.

But be clear, joy is also ours today! Joy in Christ is not just a future reality. We have joy now! Until we see Jesus again at his Second Advent, the joy of knowing we are loved and saved by Christ serves as strength for us.

The prophet Nehemiah long ago served the Hebrews who had returned from exile in Babylonia. They were just rediscovering the Word of God and were mourning the fact that they had never heard the Word of God before. At one point (Nehemiah 8:10) Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” The joy of the Lord is your strength.

Joy itself, found in a living and loving God, becomes for us a strength, a fortress, a stronghold in this broken and troubled world. The star of joy shines down on us, shattering our darkness and gloom. Healing heartache. Restoring gladness.

So whether the brokenness of this world is evident because one lives within the confines of a walled city or in the midst of war... Or if one’s heartache is the result of catastrophes like floodings or fires, tornadoes or hurricanes... Or if one’s world is turned upside-down by senseless violence like that which took place in an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut, or a medical center in Reno..... Or the brokenness is evident in our own personal situation or even our own sinfulness and guilt...Remember this and remember it well, the Joy of the Lord is ours — given to us at baptism to grow in faith. The joy of the Lord is our and the joy of the Lord is our strength. Let the bright star of Bethlehem, the star of joy, shine on you each and every day and reside unshakably in the depths of your heart...until Christ comes again as victorious Lord of all! So no matter how

it may look in our world or how we may feel emotionally, we can still sing:

Joy to the world the Lord is come, let earth receive her king.

Let every heart, prepare him room.

And heav'n and nature sing... And heav'n and nature sing.

And heaven and nature sing.”

Amen.

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