

Advent Worship Series: The Bright Star of Bethlehem

Third Sunday of Advent: Star of Unity

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

December 15, 2013

Readings: Psalm 133: 1-3, Ephesians 4: 1-6, John 17: 20-26

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

“Harmony is More Than a Dating Service”

Close your eyes and imagine with me that scene near and dear to most of our hearts. I want you to picture in your mind's eye the stable scene in Bethlehem. Can you picture it? What do you see? The baby all wrapped up in swaddling clothes? Do you see Mary, looking into the face of her new born son? Do you see Joseph standing there, his head swimming with all that has happened? And do you notice the light streaming in? Where is it from? What's the source of that light on this cold Bethlehem night? That is the light of a bright star in the sky that has perched itself over Bethlehem — the Bethlehem star of unity. We imagine at least some moment of that first Christmas to be beautiful and serene.

Now open your eyes and fast forward with me. It is now not that starry night in Bethlehem. Rather, it is the night before the cross. It's the night of the Last Supper, the washing of the disciple's feet, the betrayal with a kiss. On that night, as recorded in the Gospel of St. John, Jesus prays for his first followers. Jesus prays:

“I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one.”

And, Jesus prays for future believers (John 17:20-23): “

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity.

Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

What is Jesus' praying for on the night before the cross? He prays for unity. He prays for oneness. This is so very significant. On the night before he would face the pain and suffering of the cross, he prays for us, his people, that we might be united as one. At the very heart of our Savior is his deep desire that we would be united.

And, not only does he pray for unity, he achieved it! That's exactly what St. Paul wrote of in Ephesians (2:13-18) :

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us [the two groups] one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity [out of the two], thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile [both of] them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.”

Here is a truth: Jesus came to bring unity. He restores unity between God and humanity. He gives unity among people. All this he achieved and embodied when he gave his life for the life of the world. In the wretched darkness of Good Friday, the Star of Unity, Jesus our Lord, shines brightly for all to see.... and rises again on Easter morn.

But, let's be honest, we still do live in a disjointed, divided and discordant world. Until our Advent Lord returns to restore all things and bring unity into full completion, we will still have the remnants of disunity around us.

Consider Bethlehem. The British wrested control of the city from the Ottomans during

World War I. Bethlehem was to be included in an international zone under the 1947 United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine. The same plan that created the state of Israel. Yet Bethlehem has often suffered in the conflicts of middle eastern nations. Jordan would annex the city in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. Israel would occupy Bethlehem in the 1967 Six-Day War. Since 1995, Bethlehem has been governed by the Palestinian National Authority. When battling between Palestinians and Israelis escalated in the region between 2000-2005, Bethlehem was again caught in the cross fires. Bethlehem's infrastructure and tourism industry were severely damaged. While still under the governance of the Palestinian National Authority, Bethlehem is basically surrounded by the nation of Israel. Most entrances and exits from the Bethlehem region to the rest of the West Bank are currently subject to Israeli checkpoints and roadblocks. The movement of goods and people in and out of Bethlehem therefore is greatly restricted. The recovery of tourism, the primary source of income for the city, has been greatly hampered.. ¹

There is a wall around the little town of Bethlehem. The wall it clearly communicates to the thousands of people who live in that city that they are more or less held captive to their situation. The Bethlehem wall is a symbol of sad divisions that still exist between people. Just like the Berlin Wall of days gone by, the Bethlehem wall has graffiti and messages painted all over it. One message reads, "This wall may take care of the present, but it has no future." Another message echoes the words of President Reagan in Berlin, "Tear down this wall." Yet another message cries out, "We all bleed the same color." Another simply reads, "Forgive!"

But in the place of Jesus' enfleshment, in the little town of Bethlehem, the pastor and people of Christmas Lutheran Church are seeking to bring unity by the ONLY thing that brings true unity to the world...the Gospel of Jesus Christ...and the Gospel lived out in lives of humble service. Indeed, 'the hopes and fears of all the years' are still met together

in Bethlehem. And, as the Christmas hymn says so beautifully, “Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light.”

Dr. Mitri Raheb has said the following about the work being done in Bethlehem by Christmas Church and its ministries: “Our aim is that our people, who admire stars, will dare to look up and dream, to believe in goals to strive for, and develop a new sense of hope, community, beauty and faith.” [Bright Stars of Bethlehem Website] Indeed, the Star of Unity is still shining in Bethlehem today. And it can shine brightly here in this place through us!

Brothers and sisters, let us be crystal clear, the Star of Unity will shine brightly as we find our unity NOT in our skin color, ethnic background, common language or common socio-economic status....but in the child of Bethlehem, the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, Jesus the Christ.

Christian author, A.W. Tozer, says to consider that unity this way: “Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So one hundred worshipers meeting together, each one looking toward Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be were they to become “unity” conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship.” [Tozer, The Pursuit of God]

Christian artist, author and paraplegic, Joni Eareckson Tada, would add: “Believers are never told to become one. We already are one and are expected to act like it.” In Christ...we ARE one! St. Paul reinforced this reality boldly when he wrote in Galatians [3:28]: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

But let’s be clear, the Adversary would like nothing more than to keep us divided and

fully employs a “divide and conquer” strategy. And, because of our pride and our prejudices, we have too often become complicit and willing participants in this work towards division.

But we know Satan’s schemes. We won’t let him win. We can achieve a greater unity as we do what Jesus did to bring unity. We work for unity when we love others as Jesus has loved us. We strive for unity when we forgive as we have been forgiven. Unity is realized when we seek peace in the name of the Prince of Peace.

The word peace is “Shalom” in Hebrew. In Arabic, peace is “Salaam”. Jesus himself is our Shalom. He himself is our Salaam. And as his peace permeates our lives and our relationships, we are at peace and in unity with one another.

I say “In Christ.” You say, “We are one.”

In Christ... We are one.

In Christ... We are one.

In Christ... We are one.

Amen.

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1. Most information in this paragraph were found in <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bethlehem>