

A LIGHT TO THE NATIONS

A SERMON FOR CHRISTMASTIDE  
SUNDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2013  
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
MARIANNA, FLORIDA  
TED W. LAND, INTERIM PASTOR

LUKE 2:22-40

We Presbyterians are big on doing things decently and in order. There were certain things that had to be done decently and in order in Judaism at the time of the birth of the Christ child. Circumcision was one of these things. So was the dedication at the temple. The sacrifice of two turtledoves or young pigeons was a token sacrifice, made in lieu of turning over the child to be raised in the service of the temple. And these things were done decently and in order, and the circumcision usually done on the eighth day of a baby boy's life. The dedication at the temple was done on the fortieth day.

Some have questioned the order of things in Luke and Matthew, for Matthew tells the story of the Wise Men arriving from the east, and finding Joseph and Mary and the baby Jesus in a house in Bethlehem, and of the flight to Egypt that was necessitated by Herod's order to slaughter all the infants in that region that followed the visit of the magi.

Well, it isn't like we depict it in the manger scenes, and in the Christmas pageants. The shepherds and the wise men didn't arrive at the same time. There may have been several days, maybe even several weeks, separating their visits. Doubtless Mary and Joseph stayed in the area where Jesus was born, Bethlehem, for a few weeks, while she recuperated from her delivery.

In her work of fiction about the birth of Jesus, Marjorie Holmes has them staying forty days in the "rude little stable." (*Two From Galilee*, p. 212).

Her story has the star over the stable that entire time. And on the evening of the fortieth day, when it is time to "take the little Jesus and travel to the Temple," Joseph wonders if the star will follow them, even on the treacherous journey back to Nazareth. (*Ibid.* p. 214)

She depicts the wise men coming on that very night, so that the flight to Egypt actually began with the shorter journey to Jerusalem for the dedication in the temple.

Luke omits the flight to Egypt (indeed, the whole visit of the wise men), but that may simply mean that Mary didn't tell Luke the story, or that Luke's conclusion to the infancy story which seems to send them straight from Jerusalem to Galilee, was meant to include the time in Egypt as a part of everything required by the law of the Lord. (verse 39)

Unfortunately, no one wrote down the time table of the visits of the shepherds and the wise men, or even the duration of the sojourn in Egypt, but the stories that are told, memories cherished no doubt by Mary, paint a vivid picture of those early days of the life of Christ.

We tend to forget Simeon and Anna, those saints of the temple, who were waiting to see the Messiah, and found Him in the baby Jesus. Simeon is described as a righteous and devout man, and Anna as a prophetess.

They both recognized in Jesus that for which they'd been waiting, and unabashedly proclaimed that the One for whom all Israel had been waiting had appeared.

And in his prayer, his blessing, his petition to God, that righteous and devout man describes the child as "a light to the nations." The NRSV translates as, "a light for revelation to the Gentiles..." (verse 32a)

A light to the nations...

There were those who would have limited the Messiah to Israel, to the followers of Judaism. There were those among the scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, who would have said, "He came to us, for us, from us."

But the message that John states so clearly in his gospel is that God so loved the world, the entire world, not just the Jews, that God gave the only begotten Son, so that all who believe in Him might have eternal life. (3:16)

Jesus came for the entire world. For all nations. For those whom the Jews considered unclean, strangers, foreigners, the ones they called the Gentiles.

I suspect that very few of us gathered here today would claim to be followers of a Messiah who came only for the Jews. I suspect that very few of us here today would embrace a faith that required the rigid obedience to the law that was required of the Jews at the time of Christ. One of the things that Jesus did, in His life and ministry, by His coming, was to set us free from bondage to sin. But another thing that He did was to set us free from the bondage of the law.

We are not bound by the law of the Old Testament, or by the laws heaped upon those laws by the scribes and Pharisees. We are under the law of love, the new commandment, in Jesus Christ. We are commanded to love one another as Jesus Christ loved us. (See John 15)

The light that shone in the darkness, the glory of the Lord that shone round about the angels and shepherds, the light of the star that led the wise men to the Holy Child born to be King, every light in this world, is a localized and temporary light.

Jesus is truly the light of the world. And He is a light to all nations, not just to Israel.

You know, there are folks who have written in years long gone by of the United States of America as the New Israel or the True Israel. There are those who still speak of this country as a Christian Nation.

I have long contended that we are not and never have been a nation of Christians. I'm not sure that the world has ever had a nation of Christians. Or that it ever will.

But I am excited and fascinated by what I find when I look at the growth of Christianity, the growth of the Christian church, in the world.

We Presbyterians have done some exceptional mission work in some parts of the world. We were the first denomination to evangelize the nation of Korea. And though still bitterly divided into North and South Korea, Korea is the home of the largest Presbyterian Church in the world. Jesus Christ is a light to the nation of Korea.

We Presbyterians did marvelous mission work in the region of Kenya. We must have done something right, because there are more Presbyterians in the Church of Kenya and East African than there are in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. Jesus Christ is a light to the nation of Kenya.

In Russia, once the seat of power of the Soviet Union, founded on the atheistic principles of communism, the Bible is the number one best selling book, and Bible Societies are providing a Bible to every member of the armed forces of Russia, more than a million Bibles. Jesus Christ is a light to the nation of Russia.

My friend Ted Lewis has worked with the Karen people of Thailand, a tribe of 4 million people who live in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia. They are converting to Christianity in massive numbers. Jesus Christ is a light to the nation of Thailand.

John told us in one of his letters that there would be those who would prefer to walk in darkness, and those who would hate the light. (read I John 2)

There are still places in the world where the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it, but the darkness seems to be winning. Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, some of the inner cities of America, some of the small towns wracked by poverty, by crime, by drugs, all seem to be places where the light is in danger of being snuffed out.

But Jesus is the light to the nations. His light shines around the world, and two thousand years after His birth, the light still shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. We have truly beheld His glory, and we yearn to be those who walk in the light of his presence.

We Presbyterians have a proud heritage of carrying the light to other nations. For some years in this church, the issue of world missions, foreign missions, international mission, has been on the back burner. No more! Beginning this morning, we will receive on each fifth Sunday an offering for the support of world mission, and in the very near future, we hope to share with the congregation the name of a particular missionary in a particular country, that we are supporting and that we are in a relationship of correspondence.

Some of you will say "That's nothing new; we used to do that all the time." And that is true.

Someone else will say, "But we just had a special offering the Christmas Joy Offering, last Sunday, and the Food Pantry Offering the Sunday before that."

Someone asked me once how many special offerings I thought a church should receive. My answer was, "How many Sundays are there in a year?"

I've never been able to get a session to go along with my idea, but our tithes, our pledges, are not the end all and be all of our giving to God, anymore than the tithe of the people who worshipped at the temple was the end all and be all. Their offerings were over and above their tithes, and were for special causes or on special occasions.

Some folks will give to every special offering. Some will give only to the ones that pique their interest. My perspective is that we need to give people the opportunities to give, to support the causes that are nearest and dearest to them.

For some, that will be the Food Pantry. For others, the Christmas Joy offering, for others, the World Mission offering, for some the Thornwell Offering, for some, the Easter Offering, or the Pentecost Offering.

You know, if you gave a dollar to each of them, it would still be less than a good dinner over at Madison's Warehouse. Or any other restaurant of your choice.

You know, that is sort of how I think about it: we have many choices of places to eat in Marianna, and most of those places have many choices on the menu.

At First Presbyterian Church of Marianna, I want you to have many choices on the menu of options for giving, so that all of the many works of the church can be accomplished.

With Simeon and Anna of old, with shepherds and wise men from afar, may we seek to proclaim the light of the nations, Jesus Christ, our newborn King and Risen Lord.