



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

DECEMBER 24, 2015
CHRISTMAS EVE

Starry Stranger, Guiding Light
Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

I must say it has been encouraging during this Advent season to see people getting excited about something they feel is important. It has been good to overhear conversations in which people speak with passion about what they believe to be true. And in light of the terrorist attacks around the world and domestic attacks in our own country, people put aside their fears to gather together to celebrate what to them is one of the most important events of December. I am speaking, of course, about *Star Wars: the Force Awakens!*

Apparently the seventh episode in this sci-fi drama is breaking all kinds of records for box office receipts. Worldwide the film has grossed nearly \$700 million! I would like to know how many tickets that kind of money represents, but I am guessing it is somewhere in the neighborhood of 70 million. Seventy million people who share a common interest which unites them. Seventy million people who thumbed their noses at ISIS and every other group or individual who wants to frighten them into cowering in their homes rather than living their lives. Seventy million people who care about a movie with a theme of good versus evil with, I assume, the good guys winning in the end.

Star Wars has drawn a lot of attention over the years because of its spiritual overtones of light versus darkness. We are well aware of the evil in our world and the darkness it fosters. At a time when it seems that the bad guys win an awful lot, it helps to have a chance to cheer the good guys on.

I am grateful that tonight you have chosen to gather here to celebrate something of vital importance to you. In fact, I daresay that tonight and tomorrow, all around the world, many more than 70 million people will gather to celebrate the birth of Christ. I am not going to make a series of comparisons between *Star Wars* and the Christmas story or between Jesus and the various heroes who fight the Galactic Empire or First Order, as the dark side is now known. We all know, however, that the birth of Jesus is framed in the struggle between darkness and light. The prophet Isaiah offered up the previews when he proclaimed, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness

on them light has shined” (Isaiah 9:2) and “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn” (Isaiah 60:1-3).

And so it happened. Quietly (as far as the world was concerned), unobtrusively, practically inconspicuous, a baby was born in a stable in the little town of Bethlehem. There was a light which heralded his birth, a star which attracted the attention of some observers. That star eventually dimmed, however, or, if two celestial bodies had converged, they separated. The night sky returned to its normal state. There was still darkness in the world . . . but now there was this child.

A year or two ago, Deborah gave me a book of *Classic Hymns and Carols*. It is a beautiful way to read and reflect on some of the best expressions of faith we have. Last fall she brought to my attention one of the entries in that book, a hymn-poem by Richard Crashaw titled “Hymn to the Nativity.” It has framed our Advent worship this year. A portion of that hymn is printed on the insert in your order of worship.

There are many reasons to like this hymn. The language is elegant and evocative. The images created by the combination of words play vividly in the mind’s eye. The form of the hymn is a conversation among the shepherds who had been out on the hillsides. Two of them—Tityrus and Thyrsis—share where they have been and what they have seen. I imagine the group of shepherds excitedly winding their way through the narrow streets of Bethlehem before taking the main road out of town. They turn off onto the well-worn path that will take them into the hills and back to their flocks. It has been several hours since the angels sang their “Gloria” in the starry Judean sky, but it is still night. These men have visited the stable and worshiped the infant Jesus. They are bursting with excitement. The hymn begins:

COME, we shepherds whose blest sight
Hath met Love's noon in Nature's night;
Come lift up our loftier song,
And wake the sun that lies too long.

To all our world of well-stol'n joy
He slept, and dreamt of no such thing,
While we found out Heaven's fairer eye,
And kissed the cradle of our King;
Tell him he rises now too late

To show us aught worth looking at.¹

The shepherds mock the sun for sleeping so long and missing such an important event. They ask Tityrus and Thyrsis to describe what they witnessed. Tityrus speaks first:

Gloomy night embraced the place
Where the noble infant lay:
The babe look'd up, and show'd His face;
In spite of darkness it was day.
It was Thy day, sweet, and did rise,
Not from the East, but from Thy eyes.

It turns out that this “Starry Stranger,” as the shepherds call him, needed no sun or external light to illumine his bed. Light emanated from his eyes, the window of his soul. The shepherds immediately recognized that he was the light for which they had been praying, the light which God had long promised.

The Epistle of James, traditionally ascribed to the Apostle who was Jesus’ brother states, “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (1:17). This perfect gift—the gift of Jesus to the world—is from God who created light, who is light, who brings light to our world. As John stated in the opening of his gospel, “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:4-5). James assures us that unlike any other source of light, natural or artificial, God’s light always shines brightly and is never overshadowed—not by acts of terror or hatred or insecurity or nature or circumstance—not even by a box office hit like *Star Wars*. The Starry Stranger who greeted the shepherds as a babe, who grew up in a regular family, who lived through a wilderness journey, who taught and healed and hoped right along with God’s people, who ate and drank and slept and relished life just as you and I do, this Starry Stranger continues to shine light into our lives in order to guide us through life. That is Good News! That is something to celebrate! That is reason to think about how we live.

I have shared with you before a story told by the minister and popular author Robert Fulghum about a seminar he once attended in Greece. On the

¹Richard Crashaw (1613?–1640), “A Hymn of the Nativity,” *The Complete Works of Richard Crashaw*. William B. Turnbull, Ed. (London: John Russell Smith, 1858.), 37-41. Subsequent citations are from this poem.

last day of the conference, the discussion leader walked over to the bright light of an open window and looked out. Then he asked if there were any questions. Fulghum laughingly asked him what was the meaning of life. Everyone in attendance laughed and stirred to leave. However, the leader held up his hand to ask for silence and then responded "I will answer your question."

He took his wallet out of his pocket and removed a small round mirror about the size of a quarter. Then he explained, "When I was a small child during World War II, we were very poor and we lived in a remote village. One day on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place. I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible, so I kept the largest piece. This one. And by scratching it on a stone, I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun could never shine. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places that I could find. I kept the little mirror, and as I grew up, I would take it out at idle moments and continue the challenge of the game.

As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a child's game, but a metaphor of what I could do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of the light. But light—be it truth or understanding or knowledge—is there, and it will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it. I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have, I can reflect light into the dark places of this world - into the dark places of human hearts - and change some things in some people. Perhaps others seeing it happen will do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life." ²

God in Christ has come into our world, stepped into our lives, in order to shine light into all those dark and otherwise inaccessible places. When God's light shines, darkness flees.

Starry Stranger, Guiding Light, shine in and through our lives. Amen.

²Robert Fulghum, *It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It* (New York: Ivy Books, 1988), 988.

December 24, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

There is more than enough wonder, excitement, mystery, and joy spinning through this night, O God, and we are happily caught up in its wonderful web. Thread the awe of this night in and out of everything that we do so that not even the smallest speck of your grace escapes us.

Although it seems as if the journey through Advent has only just begun, we have longed for this night over many weeks. It is not only the excitement of our holiday celebrations that captures us. We enjoy the gaiety and gift giving, but deep within us is the yearning for what this night means. Once again we gratefully receive the gift of the Christ-child and the salvation he brings. We hold out our hands and open wide our hearts because we know his gift is not only about our eternal destination but, more immediate, about our daily lives. We receive him and are once again surprised that it is he who receives us with glad welcome and eternal love.

May this night change us, O God, because the imprint of your grace sinks indelibly into our souls. May your light take up residence within us and shine from us into the world that you have created for our benefit and your companionship. Thank you, O God, for loving us enough to be with us because of who we are; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

QUEM VIDISTIS PASTORES, ETC.

A Hymn of the Nativity, sung by the Shepherds.

COME, we shepherds whose blest sight
Hath met Love's noon in Nature's night ;
Come lift up our loftier song,
And wake the sun that lies too long.

To all our world of well-stol'n joy
He slept, and dreamt of no such thing,
While we found out Heaven's fairer eye,
And kissed the cradle of our King ;
Tell him he rises now too late
To show us aught worth looking at.

Tell him we now can show him more
Than he e'er show'd to mortal sight,
Than he himself e'er saw before,
Which to be seen needs not his light :
Tell him, Tityrus, where th' hast been,
Tell him, Thyrsis, what th' hast seen.

TITYRUS.
Gloomy night embraced the place
Where the noble infant lay :
The babe look'd up, and show'd His face ;
In spite of darkness it was day.
It was Thy day, sweet, and did rise,
Not from the East, but from Thy eyes.

THYRSIS.
Winter chid aloud, and sent
The angry North to wage his wars :
The North forgot his fierce intent,
And left perfumes instead of scars.
By those sweet eyes' persuasive powers,
Where he meant frosts he scatter'd flowers.

BOTH.
We saw Thee in Thy balmy nest,
Young dawn of our eternal day ;
We saw Thine eyes break from the East,
And chase the trembling shades away :
We saw Thee, and we blest the sight,
We saw Thee by Thine own sweet light.

TITYRUS.
Poor world, said I, what wilt thou do
To entertain this starry stranger ?
Is this the best thou canst bestow—
A cold and not too cleanly manger ?
Contend, the powers of heaven and earth,
To fit a bed for this huge birth.

THYRSIS.
Proud world, said I, cease your contest,
And let the mighty babe alone,
The phoenix builds the phoenix nest,
Love's architecture is His own.
The babe, whose birth embraces this morn,
Made His own bed ere He was born.

TITYRUS.
I saw the curl'd drops, soft and slow,
Come hovering o'er the place's head ;
Offering their whitest sheets of snow,
To furnish the fair infant's bed.
Forbear, said I, be not too bold,
Your fleece is white, but 'tis too cold.

THYRSIS.
I saw th' obsequious seraphim
Their rosy fleece of fire bestow,
For well they now can spare their wings,
Since Heaven itself lies here below.
Well done, said I ; but are you sure
Your down, so warm, will pass for pure ?

BOTH.
No, no, your King's not yet to seek
Where to repose His royal head ;
See, see how soon His new-bloom'd cheek
'Twill mother's breasts is gone to bed.
Sweet choice, said we, no way but so,
Not to lie cold, yet sleep in snow !

FULL CHORUS.
Welcome all wonders in one sight !
Eternity shut in a span !
Summer in winter ! day in night !

CHORUS.
Heaven in earth ! and God in man !
Great little one, whose all-embracing birth
Lifts earth to Heaven, stoops Heaven to earth !

Welcome, tho' nor to gold, nor silk,
To more than Cæsar's birthright is :
Twin sister seas of virgin's milk,
With many a rarely-temper'd kiss,
That breathes at once both maid and mother,
Warms in the one, cools in the other.

She sings Thy tears asleep, and dips
Her kisses in Thy weeping eye :
She spreads the red leaves of Thy lips,
That in their buds yet blushing lie.
She 'gainst those mother diamonds tries
The points of her young eagle's eyes.*

Welcome—tho' not to those gay flies,
Gilded i' th' beams of earthly kings,
Slippery souls in smiling eyes—
But to poor shepherds, homespun things,
Whose wealth's their flocks, whose wit's to be
Well read in their simplicity.

Yet, when April's husband show'rs
Shall bless the fruitful Maia's bed,
We'll bring the first-born of her flowers,
To kiss Thy feet, and crown Thy head.
To Thee, dread Lamb ! whose love must keep
The shepherds while they feed their sheep.

To Thee, meek Majesty, soft King
Of simple graces and sweet loves !
Each of us his lamb will bring,
Each his pair of silver doves !
At last, in fire of Thy fair eyes,
Ourselves become our own best sacrifice !

*This verse is not in the version of the Paris edition of 1652.

Source:

The Complete Works of Richard Crashaw. William B. Turnbull, Ed. (London: John Russell Smith, 1858), 37-41.
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