

## The Message for Sunday, January 3, 2010

**Title:** "Light In the World"

**Scripture:** Matthew 2:1-12

**I. Light in the world...** I was recently reminded of a story once told by Bishop Kenneth Goodson, the Bishop of the North Alabama Conference in the late 1960's and early 1970's. One year, Bishop Goodson asked his granddaughter what she would like for Christmas. She told him, "The world."

While many children seem to ask for a lot, Bishop Goodson knew that what she meant was a globe. In the days before the internet, he had to get out and look in stores. He finally found one on a swivel that he knew would be just the thing for his granddaughter.

On Christmas morning, while opening her presents, he pointed to a box over in the corner. His granddaughter went over to the box and ripped off the paper. She opened the box; but instead of the joyful glee that usually accompanies a great gift, she only uttered something polite about the globe.

Bishop Goodson knew that something was wrong. Apparently, this world had not been what his little granddaughter was expecting. Later in the day, Bishop Goodson went up to his granddaughter and asked what was wrong with the globe he had selected for her.

She told him that nothing was wrong. She had just wanted one that would light up. And then she said, "It's all right. I know that it costs more to have light in the world."

**II. Christ...** I once read that children seldom misquote the truth. More importantly, children often encapsulate truth in little, easy-to-understand packages. Jesus implied as much when he quoted a portion of Psalm 8. (Matthew 21:16, paraphrasing Psalm 8:2) Bishop Goodson's granddaughter spoke the truth because it does *cost more to have light in the world*. And, that includes having the light of Jesus Christ.

As an aside, let me say just this one thing. This past week, I was reading an article in a national news magazine about the modern conditions in the ancient city of Bethlehem. I have gotten used to articles replacing "A. D." and "B. C." with "C. E." and "B. C. E." after dates. "A. D.," of course, stands for "*Anno Domini*," or "In the year of the Lord." "B. C." has long stood for "Before Christ." Now, "C. E." ("Common Era") and "B. C. E." ("Before the Common Era") are gaining almost universal usage. I do not like it, but I am accustomed to it.

Well, this article on Bethlehem referred to Jesus as "Jesus of Nazareth," (implying an ordinary human) whereas in the past it would simply have said, "Jesus" or even "Jesus Christ." For me, it is still "Jesus Christ."

**III. Light...** In 1865, an Episcopal priest by the name of Philip Brooks was visiting the Holy Land over the Christmas Holidays. On Christmas Eve, he borrowed a horse and rode six miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. When he got to Bethlehem, he visited the hillside caves reported to be the same ones where the shepherds heard the angels sing, and where they saw the star. (When tours are able to make it through customs,

they still stop at those caves. I am hoping to go there in the early part of 2011.)

Later that evening, Rev. Brooks worshipped in the ancient Church of the Nativity, built over the cave that served as the stable where Jesus was born. As Rev. Brooks headed home, he looked back over the city and was inspired to write a carol. Most of us are familiar with the poem he wrote: “O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie. Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by. Yet, in thy dark streets shineth, the everlasting light: The hope and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” (<http://clergyresources.net/Faggart/Advent/Bethlehem%20what%20goes%20there.doc>)

Jesus is still the Christ; and Jesus is the light of the world. Jesus said as much of himself in the Gospel of John. (Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life. [John 8:12]) And, there has always been some cost involved in affirming that.

As a young child, I used to marvel at the trip of the Wise Men. I imagined how long it must have taken. As an adult, I know that much more is involved than just making a trip of hundreds and hundreds of miles—if not a thousand. First, if you want to travel by the light of a star, then you have to travel at night. Second, travel in their world was much more difficult because of the threat of thieves and brigands. They had to travel with a caravan. Third, what of supplies? Not everything could be carried. They had to count on oases and on having large wallets—and that does not count the value of the gifts they carried.

The trip was at great personal and financial cost for these Persian astrologers. But then, their trip also reminds me of something I read not too long ago. In the March, 2009, issue of the *Smithsonian* magazine there is an article about endangered cultural treasures. (Abigail Tucker, *Smithsonian*, Col. 39, No. 12, March 2009, pp. 33-35.) One of them is the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

The Church is in horrible repair. Dee and I were there in 2000, and signs of deterioration were evident, then. Now, the roof is in such bad shape that water is threatening to damage much of the interior.

The church was built around 330 A. D. by Emperor Constantine after his mother traveled to the Holy Land in search of holy sites. It was partially destroyed in rioting in 529 A. D., but was then restored by Emperor Justinian. In 614 A. D., when the Persians invaded, they left the church intact because they saw on one wall a mosaic of the Wise Men, dressed in traditional Persian clothing. When the Crusaders arrived in 1099 A. D., they posted 100 knights to guard the place.

But, in the years that followed the church was, and has continued to be, the site of much squabbling and even brawls. In fact, one can see piles of stones laid back by the brawlers for the next time they have a fight.

The problem is not what many think. It has nothing to do with the military standoff in 2002. And, money is not the issue. Even the Palestinian Authority, now in control of Bethlehem, has offered money to help put a new roof on the church. The problem is the jealousy among the three groups who have responsibility for the ancient church.

The Greek Orthodox Church, the Armenian Orthodox Church, and the Franciscans all claim ownership of the church. Their infighting got so bad in the Middle Ages that

the Ottoman Sultans put into place a law called, “The Status Quo.” It simply states that whoever was in charge of specific areas on that particular date would continue to be in charge of that specific area. When there is some kind of dispute, even brought on by cleaning someone else’s area, there might be a brawl. These three groups can not agree on the renovation plan. And that is because if one group does more to repair the roof than another, then they could lay claim to the entire church.

The entire story is a reminder that even though the light of Christ first shone at this place, it is now a place of darkness, disrepair, and distress. It also reminds us that when light shines in a dark place, it often makes for a deep and lasting contrast. What people then decide to do because of that light is up to them. Some receive it, and others do not know what to do with it.

**IV. Refusing the light...** And so it was with the Wise Men. They did not know what to do with the light that they had followed. They had followed the star for hundreds, possibly thousands of miles. And yet, when they got to within five to six miles of the very place to which they had been traveling, they stopped and asked for directions.

In their naïveté, they went to the palace of the King. That is a logical place to find someone born to rule. Of course, that set off a chain reaction of despair and destruction, because Herod, in his mistrust of anything that might challenge his power, tried to trick the Wise Men into revealing the location of this supposed usurper.

After the Wise Men were warned in a dream, they avoided Herod by going home another way. This made Herod so mad that he sent soldiers to kill every child two years old or under in and around Bethlehem.

(1) And that leads me to the first point I want to make. We all know what John 3:16 says: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that whosoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Likewise, many will remember John 3:17: “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.” But, do you remember what follows?

Beginning with verse 19 we read: “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.” (John 3:18-20)

Popular author Maurice Freehill once wrote, “Who is more foolish, the child afraid of the dark or the man afraid of the light?” (<http://www.quotegarden.com/light.html>)

The cost of having light in the world is that some refuse the light. When people refuse light, sin abounds and despair is multiplied. And that has a devastating effect on all of humanity.

**V. Personal cost...** (2) The second thing I want to say is this. The cost of having light in the world is not only what happens when people refuse the light. Pulitzer prize winning novelist, Edith Wharton (1862-1937) once said, “There are two ways of spreading light: To be the candle or the mirror that reflects it.” (<http://www.quotegarden.com/light.html>)

Christ is the candle. We are the mirror that reflects His light. A long time before Edith Wharton, Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “You are the light of the world.” And then He said, “Let your light so shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:14, 16)

The cost of having His light in the world is what happens when we decide to become His disciples. Every one of the Apostles paid a price when he accepted the call Jesus placed on his life. Every one of the original Apostles paid with his life, except John. And, it was John who took Mary and cared for her in Ephesus for the rest of her life.

The cost of each of us being the mirror varies from person to person. Some give up personal time or resources to provide ministry. Some give up careers to be in ministry. But to have ministry, there is always a cost—beginning with God, because he lost His own Son.

**VI. Costly...** (3) And the third thing I want to say is this. One of my favorite authors is the late humorist, James Thurber (1894-1961). What he wrote was often whacky; but buried in his humor was a deep insight into humanity. He once said, “There are two kinds of light: The glow that illumines, and the glare that obscures. (<http://www.quotegarden.com/light.html>)

Both kinds of light are costly. Because of the glare of some Christians, Benjamin Franklin once said, “Lighthouses are more helpful than churches.” (<http://www.quotegarden.com/light.html>) Sometimes, churches can come across as self-absorbed, and self-righteous. The cost of that kind of discipleship turns people off; and they refuse to have anything to do with the church. But, a church that is nurturing, caring, and spirit-filled can have a positive witness. ‘And the cost of that kind of church? ‘A life totally surrendered to Christ.

Light in the world costs more. Are you prepared to pay the price? Amen.

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