

1.19.2022, Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 8; Ephesians 5:8-14; Matthew 2:1-22

“You are light”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Each year a theme for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is chosen under the guidance of the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church. This year’s theme is Matthew 2:2, “*We have seen his star in the East and have come to pay homage to him,*” and was selected by the Middle East Council of Churches in Beirut, Lebanon. With minor changes, we are using this ecumenical Order of Worship tonight.

It may seem unusual to revisit the story of the Magi and the star of Bethlehem so soon after Epiphany. However, the theme about light in the darkness is not simply a Christmas text; it is the central ongoing act of God revealed in Jesus Christ. In these difficult times among all nations, humanity needs light in the darkness, light that Christians proclaim has appeared in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the light of the world, and it is only in Jesus that the church finds its visible unity. This theme is more important than ever for the world and all churches.

The Christian church finds its unity only in Jesus Christ; it does not find its unity in a particular theology or theologian, or in languages or national traditions. Theologies and national traditions are, of course, important ways through which the gospel is proclaimed, but theology, language and national traditions are simply vessels carrying the living reality of Jesus Christ in this world. This means, of course, that each of us are vessels carrying the light of Christ. All churches in every language and tradition are vessels carrying the light of Christ in the world. It is Christ and his light in which the church in all nations find their unity.

My earliest memories of discovering Jesus as the source of unity in the church were as a teenager in Chicago in my home congregation. Immediately after the Vietnam War, my home congregation helped a Chinese Lutheran Church get a start in our church building, as well as sponsoring Asian refugees in the aftermath of that war. As a young person I was fascinated at seeing the Bible written in another language than my own. The Chinese Lutheran Church that met in our building quickly became a vibrant light attracting people of many other Asian nationalities.

Though we usually worshiped and gathered separately in the same building, once or twice a year we gathered for joint worship services, around Easter or Pentecost, and again in the summer with an international picnic after worship on the church lawn, as Bingo was played simultaneously in

English and several Asian languages. On these occasions, Sunday worship was bilingual, the bulletin printed in English and Chinese, and the sermon delivered with translation. It began to dawn on me as a young person that God hears the prayers of all people in all their languages and diversity. I also began to realize how important it is to have a Bible in one's own language so that one might learn about Jesus, the light of the world. As I reflect upon these experiences I realize the light of Christ was leading me as a young person, as it had the Magi, into the mystery of Christ and his body, the church, among the nations. I began to understand that the church is always *both* local in a particular place and language, while also transcendent and universal encompassing all people. I remain grateful for these experiences of my youth because through them, I began to grasp the Christian vision that all people are made one in and through Jesus, the light of the world.

As a parish pastor in Japan, the Week of Prayer for Christianity Unity was observed with prayer breakfasts and ecumenical worship services. But one later experience in my work in Japan is memorable. I was asked to preach at Sophia University, a large Jesuit school in Tokyo. On the final day of the Week of Prayer, I stood as the lone Protestant among a Jesuit community of priests and brothers from all over the world, from Africa, Latin America, North America, Europe, and Asia. I preached in Japanese since that was the language in which we all worked, the vessel through which we found our unity in Jesus Christ. After the service, a retired Jesuit priest embraced me with a hug, saying, "Thank you. We are brothers in Christ!"

I share these brief personal experiences because the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is an "annual moment" in our journey of faith in which we lift our eyes upward to the light of the star that led the Magi, and through them, all nations to the Christ-child. Imagine with me a world in which all peoples and nations could greet one another saying, "We are brothers and sisters in Christ!" Imagine with me a world in which enemies are reconciled in Christ as sisters and brothers.

This year's theme of following the light, thereby becoming the light of Christ, is a reminder that Christians are people who always look upward to Christ and outward to the world. Looking up we are led by the light of Christ, as we journey outward into the world to all the nations so that in Christ we might become one. The unity of the church is Jesus Christ. Unity in Christ is the only true unifying reality that drives out fear, gives peace, and makes a divided world into one people of God.

As a North American, it is good for me to be reminded that the Magi came from the East, most likely from Persia, present day Iran. In the mystery of God's own self-revelation, the light of Christ first appeared over a region known today as Asia, long before North America was known among

the nations, and long before present day nations and their political systems.

Matthew's gospel reminds us that when the Magi were led to the city of Jerusalem they saw political fear and strife. Jesus was born not into a world at peace but into a world divided by fear. King Herod and Jerusalem with him were rent by the fear of a potential political rival. Yet the light of the world was born not to oppress but to bring unity and healing to a divided and sinful world. Christ continues to shine upon our own divided world, offering unity and hope to the nations of today.

Reflecting upon this light that led me as a young person, I realize that my home congregation opened itself to refugees and people from a part of the world that had been seen as the Other, as enemies. As Jesus and his family were seen as the Other, fleeing King Herod as refugees, the church continues to see Christ in others who seek safety and peace in a world divided by sin.

The gospel story about the Star, the Magi, Jesus and the holy family continues to speak to us today. We are people in need of light that shines in the darkness; we are people in need of a Savior who knows our suffering and brokenness, offering new life in unity with him.

In the reading from Ephesians, Paul writes, "*For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light.*" Paul encourages us to see, like the people of ancient Jerusalem, we are called out of darkness to be light for others. Paul says, "*but now in the Lord you are light.*" "*You are light*" is a statement that our identity as Christians is found only in the light of Christ. Like the Magi, who shared the light of Christ with all nations, we are to live as light in the darkness of the world as sisters and brothers in Christ.

Baptized in the waters of Holy Baptism, we share a unity with sisters and brothers in every nation, because in Christ we are one body, the church. Protestant, Roman Catholic and Orthodox, we are one body, the holy catholic and apostolic church.

Lifting our eyes upward to the light, we say with voices in many languages, "*We have seen his star and have come to pay homage to him.*" Pay him homage with your life; live as light in the darkness. The light of Christ drives out fear and darkness. In a divided world, offer your life as light in the darkness.

With Christ, *you are light*. Amen.