

A SONG, A STAR, A SAVIOR

In the FAMILY CIRCUS cartoon, the little girl sits her baby brother on her lap and tells him the story of Christmas. It goes something like this: "Jesus was born just in time for Christmas up at the North Pole surrounded by 8 tiny reindeer and the Virgin Mary. Then Santa Claus showed up with lots of toys and stuff and some swaddling clothes. The 3 wise men and elves sang carols while the Little Drummer Boy and Scrooge helped Joseph trim the tree. In the meantime, Frosty the Snowman saw this star." Thus concludes the reading of the Christmas story according to the Family Circus.

We want to deal this morning with some of the simple, basic elements of the Christmas story. Hopefully, the rush and turmoil of pre-Christmas shopping, decorating, banquets, and all the other stuff that comes with the holidays is for the most part behind us, and now it is time to deal with those quiet, precious truths that occupy such an important place in our hearts. There are three things we need this Christmas to make this a time of spiritual growth and renewal.

FIRST OF ALL, WE NEED A SONG THAT WE CAN SING. How much poorer Christmas would be without the sounds of music in the air. "Silent Night, O Little Town of Bethlehem, Joy to the World." How our hearts rejoice to hear the triumphant hymns and the tender carols that herald this special season of the year. I could not imagine letting Christmas go by without hearing these and the other great songs of Christmas being sung. There is something about Christmas that lends itself to lovely melodies and gentle rhymes of adoration and praise.

And of course, the greatest Christmas song of all is the song the shepherds heard on the hillside. The song of the angels: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace, good will toward men." That is a song we need to sing throughout the year. As I said last week, what a lift it was to hear those astronauts as they circled the earth on Christmas Eve read from the bible. Their perspective helped me become aware that we are all fellow passengers on the "Space-ship Earth." Such a reminder is music for any season of the year.

During World War II an air strip was built on a small tropical island in the South Pacific. The chaplain and others had tried to tell the natives about the Christian faith, but the natives responded slowly. Orders came to move on at Christmas 1943. The departing Americans gave a farewell party with make-shift gifts, and several tried to explain the origin of Christmas and the true meaning of the Christmas spirit. A few years later the same chaplain stopped at the island en route to a Far East assignment. He was greeted with excitement and taken to see the beautiful church the natives had built. Over the doorway was crudely letter, "This is our Church, built on faith and brotherly love."

The chaplain stayed for a service of worship in the church. There were no seats; the songs were all Christmas carols because those were the only songs they knew. One native explained to the chaplain, "After you left, we built the Church to worship Jesus. We worship him with the only service we know, Christmas, the day he was born. Every day is Christmas here. Every day the Christ child is born anew. Our gift to give is love. Our Church, we call it, the Christmas Church." How the world needs a Christmas song and a Christmas church.

SECONDLY, WE NEED A STAR THAT WE CAN FOLLOW. Indeed, it may be that the greatest need of our time and our generation is to find a star, "a singular goal, objective, or ideal," upon which we can fix our gaze and toward which together we can move. The tragedy of our time is that people are pulling in so many different directions that, rather than moving toward the Kingdom of God, we seem more likely to be headed in the other direction.

We need a star from on high to follow. We need a vision of a better world toward which to strive. If there is any urgent demand being thrust upon the Christian church today, it is the plaintive plea of society to the church to translate the concept of the Kingdom of God into concrete Twenty-first century language. I think that is why there are so many different translations of the Bible, so that all people will be able to understand what God is all about.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, in his book **ON BEING FIT TO LIVE WITH**, tells of a church on the coast of England that had been destroyed in a hurricane. Its members felt unable to build it again because there were no funds, so the ruins remained untouched. Untouched until one day, when the British Admiralty sent a representative to urge its rebuilding. He told the people since they could not afford to rebuild the church, the government of England would. Then he added: "The spire of your church is on our charts and maps. It is the landmark by which all the ships on the seven seas steer their course."

Certainly the decency and honesty of Christmas is part of God's kingdom. A 21st century world searches for something to believe in. We want to know that traditional values and high ethical standards are still alive and relevant in this new age. People look to the church to put that star back into the heavens. That is the second thing we need: a star that we can follow.

Here is the final, but most important, thing to be said: **WE NEED A SAVIOR THAT WE CAN WORSHIP.** Norman McMurray tells about a palace in the city of Rome which has a great high dome. Inside that dome there is a painting known as "The Dawn" by Guido Reni. In order that visitors may see this masterpiece, a table has been placed directly beneath the dome, and on the table

a mirror. When you look into the mirror, you see the majestic painting far above. Is that not what the Incarnation is all about? Jesus of Nazareth is the "Mirror image" of God.

It was Christmas Eve and a woman and her children were getting ready to go to church. Her husband wasn't going. He simply couldn't understand what Christmas was all about, this claim that God became man. It had been snowing all day and it was beginning to snow harder as the man's family rode off to the church without him. He drew a chair up to the fireplace and began to read his newspaper.

A few minutes later, there was a thudding sound at the kitchen window. When he went to investigate, he found a flock of birds out in the back yard. They had been caught in the storm, and in a desperate search for shelter, were trying to fly through the kitchen window. He was a kind man so he tried to think of something he could do so the birds wouldn't freeze. "The barn!" he thought. That would make a nice shelter.

He put on his coat and overshoes and tramped through the deepening snow to the barn and opened the door wide and turned on the light. But the birds didn't come in. Food will bring them in he thought. So he hurried back to the house for bread crumbs which he sprinkled on the snow to make a trail to the barn. But the birds ignored the bread crumbs and continued to flop around helplessly in the snow. He tried shooing them into the barn by walking around waving his arms. They scattered in every direction except into the warm, lighted barn. "They find me a strange and terrifying creature," he said to himself, "and I can't seem to think of any way to let them know they can trust me.

Puzzled and dismayed, he pondered this thought, "If only I could be a bird myself for the moment, perhaps I could lead them to safety." If only I could be a bird myself... Just then the church bells began to ring, pealing the glad tidings of Christmas. The man stood silently for a minute, then sank to his knees in the snow.

"Now I understand," he whispered as he lifted his gaze to the sky. "Now I see why you had to become man."

The world needs that reflection of God's goodness and love. It needs it before it will be able to sing the song of "Peace on earth and Good Will to all men." It needs it before it will recognize and follow the star of lasting values and high ethical standards. It needs a Savior that it can worship. And that is our greatest need as well: to kneel before the manger of Bethlehem, to pray "Come into my heart, Lord Jesus." Then within our hearts we will hear the song and behold again the star. For the Savior will make us His own.