

The Nativity of Our Lord (Christmas Eve) • December 24, 2017

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Isaiah 9:2-7

“Dawning”

I have to salute the church down the street from us for their roadside electronic display this past week. The message on it scrolled up from bottom to top, reading: “A long time ago in a Galilee far, far away...” While my inner Star Wars nerd was thinking, “Nice!”, my inner theology nerd was thinking “The first Christmas was in Bethlehem!” That wouldn’t work quite as well on the sign, though.

*Star Wars: The Last Jedi* is now out in theaters – and doing quite well from the sound of it. (Yes, I’ve seen it, but don’t worry: I’m not going to spoil any of it here.) There’s something about the core concept of good versus evil that has drawn people into the story for forty years now. You’ve got battles against overwhelming odds featuring farm boys, scoundrels, princesses, outcasts, and rebels. The light side and the dark side of the Force wax and wane, galactic conflict pivoting around key players and their personal relationships. The galaxy is in turmoil. It’s right there in the name of the series: *Star Wars* is about war, war that’s been waged for a very long time.

Into the war step heroes. Most of them aren’t really even trying to be heroes. It’s their choices, their actions, that end up making a huge difference in how events play out. When he first set out to tell the story of *Star Wars*, a young George Lucas was inspired by Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Without getting into all its details, Campbell’s work explored the concept of “the Hero’s Journey” and how you could find its pattern in the traditions of different cultures around the globe and across millennia. You’ll find that pattern in the story of *Star Wars*, in mythology, and – as some would argue – even in Christianity.

Telling the story of a hero brings people together. And if you think about it, it makes sense. We need a hero. We’re holding out for a hero.<sup>1</sup> When you’ve got to battle against overwhelming odds, wouldn’t you want someone to step in and bring the victory that you need? Right now in popular culture, we’ve got superheroes all over the place. Telling their stories, we give these characters fantastic abilities or resources beyond anything that us ordinary folks could hope to have. They get cool names and titles. And we give many of them those qualities that we’d most like to see in ourselves.

When *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* debuted two years ago, some criticized it because they thought it retreaded the story of the first *Star Wars* movie, *A New Hope*. The hero’s origin story coming from humble beginnings, the villain in the black mask, the loveable droids, the desperate plan to destroy a superweapon that can blow up worlds – all too similar to what has come before. With the coming of *The Last Jedi*, some expected that this second, potentially darker, movie of the sequel trilogy would copycat *The Empire Strikes Back*. Who needs another retreaded story?

You don’t.

The story that we share this Christmas isn’t a retreaded tale of a made-up hero. It’s not an origin story of someone who accidentally stepped into a bigger conflict to become the deliverer for people who were facing overwhelming odds. And it’s not simple about remembering something that happened a long time ago in a place far, far away. But it *is* a story about a war.

We’d already lost the war. We were the people who lived under the oppression and tyranny of our captors. We had no reason to hope. We knew only the darkness. We human beings are born into a land of deep darkness, lost and stumbling around. We’re captive, enslaved to the enemy from which we are not able to escape. It’s been that way ever since humanity fell into sin – a retreaded story above all others! And then the light dawned.

You are the people of whom the prophet Isaiah writes, “*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.*” (Isaiah 9:2) The word of Scripture that you’ve heard this evening – word that speaks of darkness and light, of a child born in humble circumstances – is about the dawning of a new hope for all people.

Christmas is not an origin story, but it does mark a new chapter in *your* story. The eternal Lord and maker of all steps down into our world to be one of us, to be the deliverer that God had promised to send

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks, Bonnie Tyler!

to humanity. Christmas celebrates the miracle in the manger, God coming to be with you and me as a human being, as our Savior from the darkness of sin and death. The story continues through Good Friday, which recalls his suffering and death on the cross that makes restored life with God possible. It rings out of the empty tomb on Easter, showing the Savior's victory over the grave. It climbs the mount on the day of Ascension, when he sent his people out to tell the story of the dawning of the Messiah, God's Son, for everyone. **His story is your story**, and it continues through you.

If you're concerned that *The Last Jedi* is a retreading of what's come before, don't be concerned. It doesn't follow along with expectations for what *Star Wars* has to be; it blows them up.

This Christmas Eve, God is at work to blow up expectations.

God the Son has come to be the one, true hero that we need, to be the one to defeat the enemy and the forces of sin and death which overwhelmed us and left us captive and enslaved. But the Messiah didn't come as a warrior, he came as a servant. Who expects a servant to be the Savior?

Isaiah did. Throughout the prophet's message, he tells of the promised hero who would also be the ultimate servant. Tonight, as we celebrate that baby born for us, we hear the titles he bears: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. This is the hero who "does wonders" – beyond being wise and extraordinary, he delivers miracles. This is the champion who brings the might of God Himself to conquer all enemies, even the powers of spiritual darkness. This is the one who has come to bring you into God's family forever. And he is the prince who brings peace that the world doesn't possess. This is who God sent to save you.

With Isaiah, I get to stand before you and proclaim that the light has dawned. It's not a disembodied light to shine on you or show you the way. This light is personal. This light is the presence of the Lord Himself who has come to stand with you in the land of deep darkness... and then transform it.

When the light dawns, darkness can't but help to give way. As Paul writes in tonight's Epistle reading from Titus 2, Jesus gave himself to redeem you and purify you so that you could live life with God, zealous in sharing that life in caring for family, friends, neighbors, and strangers. Jesus has come to bring his light into your life and your world, to give you hope that no made-up hero or mythology could match. He does it in unexpected ways, to be sure, coming to you through word and water, bread and wine, as a simple baby in a manger.

*Star Wars* keeps coming back to the concept of hope. It regularly pops up in *The Last Jedi*, reminding its characters of the spark of hope that will ignite the fire that will overcome the oppression and tyranny of evil in the galaxy. The hope that we have in Christ is more than a spark: it is the full-fledged dawning of the Son that brings forgiveness and renewed, restored life with God to light. Emmanuel, God-With-Us, is born for you.

A long time ago in a Bethlehem far, far away, the light dawned to break the darkness of our world. To us a child is born, to us a son is given: God's Son, the ultimate hero, has come.

Blessed Christmas! The Lord be with you!

**Amen.**