



We Saw the Star in the East, and we came to worship him

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity – 2022 Wolfville, Nova Scotia (23 January 2022)

Peter Noteboom, General Secretary

First Reading

Isaiah 9:2-7

Second Reading

Ephesians 5:8-14

Gospel Reading

Matthew 2:1-12

Sermon

We saw the star. They left by another road.

I tumbled into the ecumenical movement by accident.

I was raised in a rural area, in a denominational tradition that in our area did not acknowledge other Christian traditions. One of my earliest memories of a Sunday sermon is one that fingered Baptists, Catholics, and other Christian traditions with the rhetorical question, “aren’t you glad you are not like them.”

Then again, in the 1960’s, this attitude and teaching might not have been so uncommon. Maybe you remember, or maybe you’ve heard stories told in your family or in your tradition about how Christian churches did not acknowledge one another, did not cooperate with one another; have been divided, or even now – today – are dividing. This is certainly true of my own tradition, the Christian Reformed Church in North America. Just this week I have been corresponding with my pastor about how to respond to the current challenges of division sparked by differing perspectives and convictions regarding human sexuality.

Polarisation, division, extremism, a chill, echo chambers... I think we may all agree that we live in a time of change and in a society where polarisation, differences and division, “a hand up” has become part of our daily lives. Many of us are worried about how political rhetoric or gossip on social media translates into being left out, left behind, hurt, excluded, deflated.

What about you, is your church life, is your faith life best described by what divides and separates, or by living into unity and peace?

We saw the star. They left by another road.

For me, it was the late 1990s when I tumbled into the ecumenical movement in Canada. My dream job had been posted on the bulletin board of my graduate school, I applied for the position, and to my surprise I was hired to serve as the Associate Secretary, Justice and Peace of The Canadian Council of Churches.

I have had the extraordinary privilege of working alongside the member churches of the Council in the domains of human rights, jubilee debt cancellation, public health care in Canada, free trade agreements, refugee rights, climate justice, biotechnology and genetic manipulation, synthetic biology and human heritable genome editing, peace and disarmament, anti-Black racism, truth and reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples in Canada, antisemitism and Islamophobia. I have had the privilege of being up close, hosting conversations about what Canadian churches have to say about all these issues, where our points of unity lie, and what we say together. The track record of Canadian churches speaking together is, like the list of topics above, meaningful and relevant and persuasive.

This was my dream job because I was and am passionate about the call of Christ on our political lives, on how we use power, what we understand by justice, how we, how Christians, how Christian churches, how people of faith contribute to justice in the public square and to justice in Canadian society. I remain curious and interested in that unique quality of Christ's call on our lives to unity and peace, particularly the use of power: power that is empty of ourselves, not full of ourselves; power that invites and convicts but does not compel; power that is born of foolishness not self-assurance or pride.

I wonder what, or who, invited you into the ecumenical movement?

We saw the star. They left by another road.

Two months ago Dr. Rima Nasrallah from the Middle East Council of Churches led a Bible Study with the Governing Board of The Canadian Council of Churches. She taught us all how it came to be that the Middle East Council of Churches selected this passage and the theme this year, and what they saw and heard in the Christmas and Epiphany (or Theophany) story in Matthew 2: *We saw the star in the East, and we came to worship him*. You can see her Bible Study and read the transcript of her presentation on the Week of Prayer website under the 2022 resources, www.weekofprayer.ca.

I will not soon forget how she spoke about the star, the light, the light of Christ.

She reminded us that the light, though it appeared in the East, is not only for the East. In the same way, the light of Christ is not only for Christians. While the light appeared nearby, those who were nearby did not recognize it. Instead, it was people from far away who recognized the light and followed it, in fact people who were stargazers and astrologists rather than the chosen

people. “Other” people from afar.

While we may be tempted to claim the light, the light is not ours to claim.

What have we done with that light among us?

Have we assumed that others can not see it?

I am reminded of the phrase that “the finger that points to the way, is not the way.” Have we mistaken things that point to the way for the way itself? In other words, have we mistaken buildings, tradition, organizations, practices, or “the way we’ve always done things” for the light of Christ which is for all creation?

We saw the star. They left by another road.

Light is a powerful symbol. The apostle Paul describes it to the Ephesians this way, “*now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light — for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.*”

How do we recognize the light? Its fruit is found in all that is good, and right, and true.

Further back in history, the prophet Isaiah alludes, he points, he predicts, he promises the Messiah this way, *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. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.*

Endless peace, established and upheld with justice and righteousness.

Illumined by the light, are we not changed?

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For over 50 years the Wolfville Area Inter-Church Council has been illumined. The light shines and appears among us. From the beginning you’ve been responding together to poverty and food insecurity through the Foodbank. You responded together to that terrible series of shootings down the road two years ago. Your shared participation, accompaniment and

experience of the L'Arche community reminds everyone of our vulnerability. Together you respond and invite and learn with other faith communities that have come to the Wolfville area.

The Canadian Council of Churches has a similar experience: Since 1944 we have been responding to Christ's call for unity and peace. We are seeking Christ's truth with an affection for diversity. We are committed to acting in love through prayer, dialogue and witness to the gospel. We are now 26 member churches and 8 observer churches in the Anglican, Catholic, Evangelical, Free Church, Orthodox, and Protestant traditions, nearly 20 affiliates and sponsors who join in the work of unity, justice, peace, reconciliation, care for Creation... all that is right and good and true.

We are so pleased to be walking this one road together, pulled and drawn by the light.

Changed by the experience, or in the words of that other epiphany text about the Road to Emmaus, with "hearts strangely warmed" when we listen to one another.

Changed, may we leave together by another road.

Lift Candle.

Amen.