

COMPANION SYNOD TEAM

Epiphany Devotion

Rev. Gary Teske

When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. (Mathew 2:10-11)

Before proceeding with the rest of this “Noteworthy reflection on God’s Global Harmony”, please pause to watch and listen to the following video clip.



One of the most moving moments I have experienced in my visits to our overseas companion churches was hearing these 3 members of St. Luke Lutheran Church in Arsenyev sing this familiar song at the annual summer seminar of the Russian Far East Deanery in 2018. I had heard this song many times on the local radio stations and loved the lilting, flowing, soulful melody and lyrics. But I had never heard it sung with the words we hear coming from Pastor Alexander Lapochenko and his two parishioners. I didn’t recognize any of the words they were singing – except for - Hallelujah.” That word means “praise Yah” or “Praise God” in Hebrew and is an expression of praise and worship of God that is common to

nearly every language where God is worshipped. I wonder if the wisemen used it when they knelt down and worshipped Jesus beneath that bright star that they had been following for so long. I know that it is sung in Papua New Guinea even when they are singing in their indigenous language or in Melanesian Pidgin. While it only occurs 4 times in the Bible (Revelation 19) it has invaded the liturgical language of worshippers around the globe.

It struck me that as we encounter people from different languages and backgrounds, this is one word that we do hold in common and which expresses our common faith in and devotion to the God and Lord of us all. We may not be able to make sense of the sounds that precede or succeed this word of worship and praise, but we know that word “Hallelujah” and we know its significance. This song composed by Leonard Cohen contains biblical references and imagery, but if you listen to the words, it is not the sort of song usually associated with Hallelujah. It is not a song that celebrates victories and times of celebration. There is reference to King David, but it is about his affair with Bathsheba. There is reference to Samson, but not to his victory over the Philistines but rather to his wife who betrayed him, sheared his head and robbed him of his strength. Two of the verses conclude with the words, *“It’s a cold and it’s a broken hallelujah.”*

The Magi at the manger is a heartwarming scene that is replicated every Christmas season with countless creches that warm the heart to behold. But we must remember that it is but a brief interlude in a story otherwise filled with fear, tragedy (the slaughter of the innocents) and danger. That is the story being told by the song by Cohen and it is often life as experienced by us and our overseas companion churches. The church in Papua New Guinea is battling a resurgence of sorcery and our Russian Cousins in the faith are dealing with the aftermath of decades of persecution and a society that still regards Lutherans with at best ignorance and at worst, suspicion.

And yet, they sing “Hallelujah.” Sometimes it might be a cold and broken hallelujah, but they sing it and they invite us to join them in singing, speaking, shouting, or maybe just whispering that word of praise. On more than one occasion the refrain from this song has gotten stuck in my head and I have been unable to sleep because that hallelujah refrain kept cycling through my mind. But hey, what better way to drift off to sleep than with a hallelujah refrain playing through our minds. And the next time you hear or speak or sing hallelujah, I want you to think about all of our cousin Christians all over the world who are singing that word in harmony with you.

