

Christmas Eve, 2024

Luke 2:1-14

Peace. Peace. Peace. Peace. Peace, and then some more Peace. That's all I see in sermons and devotions for Christmas from all different Christian outlets. That's all I hear on the radio from Christmas songs- Peace on earth, peace between nations, peace between families, John Lennon's "Happy Christmas, War is over," David's Bowie and Bing Crosby's "Peace on Earth, can it be," or Band-Aid's "Do they Know it's Christmas," where millionaire musicians tell us how we need to do more to contribute to the World's peace, which, if I'm honest, strikes me as a bit preachy (I'm a preacher, I would know). It's on every Christmas card, it's on every commercial, Christmas is all about Peace, and that comes from the good news preached to a group of terrified shepherds outside of Bethlehem 2000 years ago, "Glory to God in the Highest, and on Earth, peace to men on whom God's favor rests." *What does that mean?* Is that peace just a feeling that we're all supposed to get on Christmas, or is it something more? Well, this is the good news of Jesus, the Gospel according to the Angels of Christmas- "**Peace.**" **1. What it's not. 2. What it is. 3. How you can get it.**

1. What it's not. Yes, Christmas is about peace. But what is that? What kind of peace are the angels talking about? What kind of peace did Jesus come to bring? Firstly, to the disappointment of John Lennon and David Bowie, it's not political or international peace. Jesus makes it clear that his kingdom is not of this world, and that his name and Gospel are not spread through physical warfare, and any nation or group that does violence or wages war in Jesus' name really is not, just using Jesus as an excuse to do something they already want to do. But Jesus himself also says that we should expect wars and rumors of wars until the very end of the world, so the idea that somehow human hatred and anger would magically disappear if we just all agree to be nice to each other is a bit naive, and not something Jesus promised. Yes, wars should bother us, and we should do everything we can to alleviate suffering, but peace on earth among nations isn't something Jesus promised, so we shouldn't put our hope in that.

This peace also is not what many Christians would make it seem, an inner, emotional serenity where everything is nice and calm in your heart and you get along with everyone and your problems melt away and everything is cheerful, happy, calm, sweet, snugly and warm. That's not Christmas. In fact, Jesus himself says the opposite! Later on, he says, "Don't think that I've come to bring peace, but a sword, to turn son against father, daughter against mother." And he tells his followers that whoever follows him is going to have to bear a cross and suffer pain. Sure, we talk about the peace of God that transcends all understanding and keeps our hearts and minds- that's what Paul says in Philippians, but keep in mind he was also in jail when he wrote that. The peace that the angels speak of is not a sentimental, gushy feeling. But let me be clear. What the angels are speaking of is not less than world peace or personal peace. It's much, much more.

2. What it is. One Christmas, I heard a pastor make this point, an excellent point when he told his congregation this- all people are *estranged* from God. That's a great way of putting it. Estranged means that two people used to be close, used to love each other, but for whatever reason, they now hate each other. Most of you have likely experienced this personally with a friend, family members, or even spouse, or know someone who has. It's a sad thing. Often, what happens is whatever you love about that person turns into something you hate about that person. A man and woman used to love each other, and that woman used to love that her husband was so patient, so kind, so willing to take her opinion into account, but now she can't stand him and she says that he's weak, indecisive, and cowardly. He used to love that his wife was so direct, so honest, so matter of fact, but now he hates it and sees her as rude, cruel with her words, and insensitive. See how that works? According to the Bible, that is exactly what has happened between us and God. Some of you know, what did Adam and Eve have when God first created them in the garden of Eden? A perfect relationship with God. And when they fell into sin, the first thing they did was they hid from God. And ever since, they and their descendants have been, according to Paul, hostile to God, hateful of God. And we see this in the way that we talk about him. God is absolutely beyond our comprehension, infinitely beyond our understanding, and we say, "I don't like that- why doesn't he do things the way I think he should do them?" That comes from a hostile, hateful, broken relationship. God is holy, and his law is perfect and guides humanity into exactly what it should be all because he loves us. And we say, "The Bible is so strict! So restrictive! So regressive!" That comes from a hostile mind. Even God in his grace, his mercy, that he loves all people and accepts whoever repents, regardless of what they've done, we say, "No, it can't be that easy. It can't be that simple. They can't be saved, not them." Everything about God is something we twist into a bad thing. We hate God, and by the way, if you aren't getting this, and you say, "I don't really hate him, what's the big deal?" Get to know him. Read your Bible. You'll find something.

That's the issue behind all issues. It seriously is. God is the source of everything that is good. God is the definition of love, and his law is what love is. The reason we don't love, the reason we aren't good, is because we aren't in alignment with the God of love. That's why there isn't world peace! That's why there's war! That's why their fighting and strife and greed! The reason there is no peace on Earth is because we lost our peace with God. We've become estranged like a couple that used be in love, and peace which the angels are celebrating in the sky is exactly what you just sang: "Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners *reconciled*." The problem isn't that we are ignorant of God's ways and need to be educated. It's not that we are lost and need to find the way. It's that we hate God, and have broken our bond from him, have become estranged from him, have sinned against him, and need to be reconciled, and in order for that to happen, we need to be forgiven.

3. How we can get it. This part of Scripture is so well known, we often skip over the powerful, beautiful details. The angels of God appear to shepherds- why shepherds? An important thing to

understand is that in the Old Testament, the Temple was where God was, and if you wanted to be reconciled to him, just for a bit, you'd have to worship him in his temple. But you had to be clean. If you had touched a dead body or any kind of excrement or were filthy in any way, you could go in- God is holy. And who were people that were constantly in contact with dead bodies and excrement- shepherds. They were, in many ways, religious outcasts- they wouldn't have been allowed in the temple to reconcile with God, and therefore, in the minds of people back then, the most estranged from God. How fitting, then, that when God comes to Earth, not in the temple, but human flesh, the Shepherds are the first to know about it. And what has he come to do, the angels call him a "Savior." That's a little insulting, isn't it? I've said this before, but if one of you came to me after the service and gave me a book called, "How to preach good sermons," and I were to say, "Thank you" what would I be admitting about myself? I remember one Christmas my cousin was given a book called, "how to talk to girls," and it was hilarious because that gift meant that he didn't know how to do that. So when the angels declare to the shepherds that a Savior has been born, what are they saying about them and us? The angels didn't say, "An example" has been born to you to follow. They didn't say, "a teacher has been born for you to listen to." They didn't say, "a politician has been born to fix the world's problems." They said, a savior- which means we need to be saved, that he would need to earn forgiveness for us so that God and humanity might once again be together in love.

That's why Jesus came in the flesh. He needed to become a human being precisely for this reason- so he could die. Jesus came to be everything we were supposed to be, to live the life we should have lived and to die the death we should have died so that there could once more be peace between God and his people. Why? Not because of anything we did for God- but all because of this- God's good will, his pleasure, his kindness toward humanity. The angels praise God for this- glory God- why? Because there is peace to the humans on whom God has favored. That's your peace- you will never have to wonder whether or not God loves you, whether or not God has forgiven you, whether or not God has the highest glory in store for you- Jesus became like you so that death would no longer be the end, but a portal through which you become like him- "Mild he lays his glory by, born that man no more may die, born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth." The beauty of Christmas is not that Jesus is the cute little baby, and I guarantee he cried, contrary to what we sang in "Away in a Manger." The beauty of Christmas is that it shows just how low God was willing to fall, just how tiny and helpless God was willing to become, just how much glory and honor God was willing to leave behind, and eventually how much God was willing to suffer so that you and him would no longer be estranged, but be reconciled, to be at peace.

What can peace with God do for you? I'm sure you've heard about the horrible shooting in Abundant Life Christian School. I found what the school leader said hours after it happened- "God wasn't surprised by this, and he is so good that he can work something good through it." How can someone have that kind of peace? This is how- that school is based on this truth, when

Christ suffered in our place, he made peace between us and our creator, so that no matter what happens, I know that God will never leave or forsake me, and can work all things for my good. “Dear Christian friend, depend on him, be of good cheer and let no sorrow move you. For God’s own child, in mercy mild, joins you to him- how greatly God must love you.” When you have peace with God, that doesn’t mean life gets easier, in fact, your heart becomes softer and less calloused and some things will break your heart more, but your peace isn’t dependent on your heart, or on your circumstances which may be atrocious, but on what Christ has done, and his peace allows you to endure this world’s hardships with a quiet, peaceful, and sometimes tearful joy. Christmas is about peace- the peace between you and God that sows peace, peace, peace, peace, and then more peace. Amen.