

Peace by Piece

Luke 2:8-20

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*The Lord's Day Evening
December 23, 2007*

This sermon is part of the sermon series "Nine Lessons and Carols"

Now if you will turn in your Bibles to Luke 2, we'll be looking at verses 8 through 14. We won't read the entire passage; we'll be looking at Luke 2:8-14. Before we read God's word, let's pray.

Lord, we thank You once again for the opportunity to worship. We thank You that we have been called out of darkness and into light to be together as a body, living for and worshiping You. And so we come. We come on this Your day as Your people, as Your body: many folk, many backgrounds, many gifts and talents; and we come with many hurts, pains, joys, praises, sorrows—but we come. So we ask that You would feed us, teach us, bless us, transform us, conform us to the image of Your dear Son. Open our eyes that we might see beautiful things, wonderful things in Your word. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hear the word of God:

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!"

May God bless the reading and hearing of His word.

Is there a more beloved passage of Scripture? Is there another passage of

Scripture that would count for you, or millions of Christians around the world, as more beloved and enjoyed, more of a favorite than this passage? Maybe Psalm 23, maybe some other passages of Scripture; but virtually everyone, whatever tradition...whatever Christian tradition, whatever denomination, conservative, liberal, somewhere in between...loves this passage of Scripture and looks forward to it every year.

One of my favorite philosophers and theologians we hear from at this time of year, Charlie Brown...you remember: "Isn't there anyone who can tell me what Christmas is all about?" Linus steps up with his blanket, up onto the stage. The single spotlight comes down, and he has this passage memorized in the King James Version. "That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown." We love this passage. It evokes for us reflection and joy and beauty and wonder. We are warmed when we hear of shepherds and sheep and fields by night, and the baby Jesus in the manger. And that is all wonderful and good. We should embrace the beauty and joy and the wonder of this passage whenever we hear it.

My wife and I at this time of year enjoy watching the Public Broadcasting Station throughout the week, and one Christmas service and program after another — beautiful! The St. Olaf College and the Mormon Tabernacle Choirs, and Anderson University — and inevitably, the emphasis of these services is this passage, this beloved passage. And we've been watching program after program, service after service, that evokes in us wonder and joy and beauty and awe as a result of hearing this passage read.

But two weeks ago (this struck me this week)...two weeks ago, had you turned on Public Broadcasting and you turned it on same time, same place, what would you have seen? You would have seen Ken Burns' series "The War," and you would have been shocked and dismayed at this tragic event. And it struck me—these two images: these beautiful choirs and this devastating, brutal war. That's where we live, isn't it? That is the world in which we live. We experience, we encounter, we know intimately this tension between beauty and joy and sorrow and trial, and war and devastation. We live in this "already and not yet."

What is this peace that the angels declare and proclaim in this passage? What is it? What is this peace that is sung of by choirs night after night? What is this peace that Linus quotes to us? What is this peace we hear about day after day after day after day during the Advent season? What is this Luke 2 peace, this Christmas peace? What is it? We could look at this passage from many different angles, but that's what I want us to focus on tonight: peace. What is this peace?

Many would argue (and you hear it all the time) it's political. It's national, it's international. We finally look forward to political — national, international — peace with the coming of Christ.

Many of you are familiar with a very well-known carol, *I Heard the Bells on*

Christmas Day.

“I heard the bells on Christmas day
Their old familiar carols play.
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth, good will to men.”

[Stanza 3]

“And in despair, I bowed my head.
‘There is no peace on earth,’ I said,
‘For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.’”

You may be familiar with the fact that normally, usually, stanzas 4 and 5 of the original poem are left out in most of our hymnals, probably because they go like this:

“And then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South
And with the sound, the carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good will to men.”

[Stanza 5]

“It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearthstones of a continent,
And made forlorn the households born
Of peace on earth, good will to men.”

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote this carol December 25, 1864, months before the close of the American Civil War, and he wrote it focusing on Luke 2 peace, hoping for political peace — national peace. Longfellow was a Unitarian. He denied the Trinity and the divinity of Christ, but he had hope for this peace in Luke 2, that it meant political, national, the end of a civil war.

But Jesus makes some unsettling statements:

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace on the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

[Hang with me! I know this isn't mistletoe and jingle bells, but hang with me!]

“I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” (Matthew 10).

See that no one leads you astray, for many will come in My name saying,

"I am the Christ," and they will lead you astray. And you will hear of wars, and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for they must take place; for the end is not yet. Nation will rise against nation, kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes and famines, and these are just the birth pains (Mark 13:8).

Troubling statements. I recently was listening to — I see a couple of you who were there — I was recently at a conference where I heard one of my favorite literary and cultural critics look back at the twentieth century in the West and say this:

"The twentieth century was one of the worst declines in human history. It mostly offers ruins, and constitutes in my judgment a net moral and cultural loss."

And then he goes on to attribute that to our cultural idolatry.

After all, which one of our modern twentieth century cultures was most elevated, if not the German culture? In 1945, as the Red Army began a final assault on Berlin, the Philharmonic was performing Beethoven, Bruckner, and Wagner. After the performance, the Nazi Party organized Hitler Youth members to stand in uniform with baskets of cyanide capsules.

The world we live in is not pretty. We don't have peace on earth. We don't have political peace, national peace, international peace, for which we so long. He goes on to say that there are only three...in his opinion, only three redeeming things about the twentieth century: movies, baseball, and ibuprofen. (Now so much for movies and baseball, but we still have ibuprofen!)

Certainly Jesus says "Blessed are the peacemakers," but we don't have political peace. We don't have national peace. We don't have international peace. It doesn't last. Yes, we should be pursuing those things, but they're relative. They're provisional. They don't last in this life.

Well, others will say of course that's not what this peace is: it's inner peace. It's equilibrium. It's being able to sleep at night. It's having an inner calm as something that is integral to our lives. But again, Jesus makes some troubling statements:

"I came to cast fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" (Luke 12).

He promises His disciples that they will be persecuted, they will be handed over to authorities by parents and brothers and sisters and friends; they will be persecuted and bear the wrath of those around them for the name of Jesus Christ. Paul tells us in Philippians 1 that belief in Christ and suffering for Christ go

together. When Christ — you know this! — when Christ comes into your life, priorities are turned upside down. Categories are rearranged. He convicts us and disturbs us and rebukes us on the inside, and churns us and changes us and upsets us from time to time.

We were the other night — in fact, I was discussing this with Bill Wymond over dinner the other night. If you haven't seen this series of very, very convicting... When we were watching this series "The War" on the history of World War II the other night, there was a young man who wrote a journal day after day after day, and he would tear the pages out and put them in his New Testament. And the day that these Marines landed on Peleliu Island in the Pacific, he found himself repeating to himself Psalm 23, "The Lord is my Shepherd...the Lord is my Shepherd...the Lord is my Shepherd," through this battle. And at the end, at the end of his journal he comes to this conclusion: "I am completely convinced after going through this battle, this war, this struggle, of the absolute absurdity that mankind is born basically good."

We face this internal struggle and trial. We live in Romans 7, don't we? I continue to do these things that I don't want to do, and I don't do the things that I do want to do, and I have this turmoil. Yes, Jesus Christ gives us inner peace. Yes, there's a very real sense in which He does that, but it's provisional, isn't it? It doesn't last.

There are some of you that know all too well what it is to be rejected by friends and family members because of your commitment to Jesus Christ. You've suffered for it. You know what it's like to be rejected by friends and family and others around you for your commitment to Jesus Christ. You remember what C.S. Lewis wrote in *The Screwtape Letters*. Screwtape writing to Wormwood, these two devils — one the trainer, and one in training:

As long as he lives on earth...[he's speaking of human beings]...periods of emotional and bodily richness and liveliness will alternate with periods of numbness and poverty. Now it may surprise you to learn that in His efforts to get permanent possession of his soul, He relies on the troughs even more than the peaks. Some of His special favorites...[and he's speaking here of God and His disciples, those who follow Jesus Christ, who know Jesus Christ]...some of His special favorites have gone through longer and deeper troughs than anyone else. Do not be deceived, Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human no longer desiring but still intending to do our Enemy's will...[to do God's will]...looks around upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.

This Christmas peace, this Luke 2 peace, is not a permanent inner peace. Yes, we have a peace as we follow Christ, but it comes and goes. It fluctuates. It's up and down, isn't it? I love what Elisabeth Elliot once said: "Joy is not the absence

of trouble; it's the presence of God." And we have trouble in this life. We don't have national and political and international peace. We don't always have the inner peace that we would long to have, that we would want to have. We suffer; we hurt; we're rejected. And we make others suffer and hurt.

Finally, this passage points to what, as we wrestle with this idea of peace? What is this peace? What is Luke 2 peace? What is Christmas peace? It's not a feeling. It's not "chestnuts roasting on an open fire, Jack Frost nipping at your nose." The peace that is spoken here, this Luke 2 peace, is a state of peace following a state of war, a state of hostility.

What war? Why all this talk of hostility and war? What war? Why is there a need for peace? It's my war. It's your war. It's our war. It's humanity's war with God that is spoken of here. Paul uses strong words:

"The carnal mind is enmity against God; for the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot."

Fighting, battling, suppressing the truth in unrighteousness; dead in sin; lost, without hope.

Spurgeon, in speaking of this enmity, this hostility, this hatred that we have as natural men and women, as sons and daughters of Adam, that we have toward God:

"It's not black; it's blackness. It's not corrupt; it's corruption. It's not rebellious; it's rebellion itself. It is not wicked; it is wickedness itself. It is evil in the concrete, sin in the essence. We are the enemy, and we are battling the truth, battling God, battling Christ, dead in sin. There is none righteous, no, not one. But there is hope."

And I have always been fascinated by this word *host* — *heavenly host*. The word here for *host* is *strategos*. It is a military term for a band of soldiers. You have a band of soldiers filling the sky from horizon to horizon declaring, proclaiming, a peace treaty written in the blood of a baby for dead sinners who don't deserve it...filling the sky, an army of angels declaring a peace treaty written in blood, the blood of this child, with the folk who are hopeless and don't deserve it. "But now, in Jesus Christ, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ," Paul says in Ephesians 2, "for He himself is our peace." (Eph. 2:13-14).

"But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ, for He himself is our peace...."

Here it is:

“Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.”

Peace on earth, mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled: that is this peace.

Romans 5:1 —

“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

“For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making [and here it is...this is Colossians 1] making peace by the blood of the cross.”

Making peace by the blood of the cross. Political peace, international peace, war between nations, will come and go. And yes, the rightful King will one day land and stay for all eternity, and there will be international political peace, internal peace... sleeping-well-at-night-peace. Being calm, having a sense that everything is OK, comes and goes, doesn't it? This peace, this end to hostility, this end to enmity between God and man through this Child proclaimed by an army is Christmas peace, and it's a peace that you can never lose. It is a peace that is eternal. It is a peace that does not come and go.

There are two kinds of people in this room: those who know this peace, and those who don't. If you have this peace, if you know this peace, if you are reconciled, justified, sanctified, if you have placed your trust in Christ — give glory to God in the highest! If you haven't...if you don't...if you don't know this peace—maybe you've been sitting here in this pew for years, maybe you're a visitor. Do you have Christmas peace? Do you know Luke 2 peace? Have you heard the voices of the heavenly army declaring peace? If you don't, what better time? What better time than Christmas to surrender? To put down your weapons, to run to God through Christ, trusting Him and Him alone, and His grace?

I love what G.K. Chesterton said about this event:

There is something defiant in Christmas, something that makes the abrupt bells at midnight sound like the great guns of a battle that has just been won. All this indescribable thing that we call “the Christmas atmosphere” only hangs in the air as something like a lingering fragrance of a fading vapor from the exultant explosion of that one hour in the Judean hills nearly two thousand years ago.

This Christmas peace is the most wonderful message that the world has ever heard, or will ever hear. Do you have it? Do you know it? There are folk out there that would be happy to come along and tell you, ‘Look, your problem is physical. If you can find the right medication, we'll get your problem fixed.’ There are

others out there that say, 'No, no, no! Your problem is moral. You need to be more disciplined. You need to be more committed. You need to be better educated and credentialed.' And then there are others that say, 'No, your problem is psychological. If you find the right counselor, the right therapist, you can fix your problem.'

Now, discipline is good, morality is good. Therapists and counselors and medicine, that is all good. But you are lost without...you have no hope without Christmas peace.

"Where meek souls will receive Him still,
The dear Christ enters in."

Let's pray.

Lord, we thank You for this in many ways sobering and joyful, serious and jubilant passage. We thank You that this peace is not something that we merit, not something that we earn, not something we can lose once we have; but it is reconciliation, end to hostility, peace treaty written in blood...the blood of our dear Savior...for, and to, and with undeserving sinners. We thank You, and we praise You for Your grace to us. And we're living in wonder and awe of this first proclamation of this peace to these wonderfully common folk. Convict us; change us; transform us; give us hearts of flesh. And we pray that this peace would evidence itself in our lives every day. We love the Lord Jesus Christ, and we praise You for Your grace to us through Him. And we pray these things in His name. Amen.

Please stand for the Lord's benediction.

May the God of peace be with you all. Amen.

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