

“Peace on Earth”

Luke 2:8-14

December 21, 2014

INTRODUCTION:

This is one of the more familiar parts of the Christmas story, the part where the angels go on a choir tour. It's a tour with only one stop, to a group of shepherds near Bethlehem in the middle of the night. I've never heard an angel choir, but that doesn't stop me from trying to imagine what it must have sounded like. I imagine them sounding like a really good boys' choir, something like the King's College Boys' Choir of Cambridge. I don't really know what it sounded like. Their musical style could have been more hip hop, though I must confess that I have a hard time picturing angels moving in the ways that usually accompany that style of music.

Luke doesn't describe what they sounded like, but he does report on the content of their choral anthem. As they had witnessed the events of Christmas from the perspective of heaven, they sang of two themes. **“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”** From where the angels sat, they saw Christmas as being all about glory to God and peace on earth. According to the angels, Jesus came to bring peace to the earth. I would like for us to consider a little more carefully exactly what they meant by this. If we just take this statement at face value, it seems not to be true. The very first Christmas was followed by a slaughter of innocent children in Bethlehem when the jealous King Herod attempted to wipe out any potential rival to his throne, no matter how small the rival may be. And things haven't changed much in the last two thousand years since then. Just this past week, we all heard of another slaughter of innocents in that Pakistani school in which Taliban terrorists came in and slaughtered over one hundred children. Where is this peace of which the angels sang?

Perhaps it is just meant to be an example of peace that if we paid more attention to, we would be able to experience such peace. Exactly one-hundred years ago this Thursday, on Christmas Day of 1914, there was a famous and widespread Christmas Day truce between the warring armies of WWI. It arose spontaneously, rather than being negotiated by leaders of the armies. There were even reports of soccer games being played between soldiers who had previously been fighting one another. Did the angels mean by their song that peace is only made possible by the coming of the Savior, and that it is up to us to follow the example of peace that Jesus set for us as a result of his coming? Let's look at these questions and more as we consider this verse today.

I. The Messengers of Peace

Why did God send this birth announcement by angels? The content of the message—that the Messiah had just been born in Bethlehem—could just as easily have come by a human prophet. But this was a message God chose to have delivered by angels and celebrated with angelic singing rather than speaking. Why did he do so?

One possible reason for the angelic messengers of this news of Jesus' birth is simply the keen interest of the angels in heaven to all things related to God's rescue plan for our fallen planet. Peter writes that angels long to look into everything related to our salvation (1 Peter 1:12). They are as hungry for news of salvation as an avid college football fan is for news about the latest recruits for his team. And when they see the mighty works of God bringing salvation to his fallen and broken image bearers, they break forth in praise to God. With their keen excitement about salvation, they would certainly be able to sing with passion unrivalled by any human delivery of this message.

Or perhaps another reason is that they come from heaven, just like the Savior whose birth they are announcing. In other words, the means of delivery fits the content of the message. There is no merely human means of bringing about the peace announced here. It must come from heaven, and it is appropriate that the message of its coming also has a heavenly origin.

There is one more possibility that I like better than these first two. It takes some childlike faith to believe in angels, and it will also take some childlike faith to believe in the Savior who brings peace. It takes some faith to believe in angels because their work and presence here is hidden from us. The Bible is clear, though, in speaking of the work of angels among us. Hebrews 1:14 says that angels are **“all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation.”** And then at the end of Hebrews there is the very intriguing command about hospitality. **“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares”** (13:2).

Some missionaries we know are here in the States for a time in order for the husband to receive some needed medical attention. They wrote an update a few weeks ago in which they reported being awakened at 3:00 a.m by the doorbell ringing. The wife asked her husband to go check it out. He was reluctant at first, believing that it was just some kind of electrical glitch. But she prevailed upon him, and he went to the front door, opened it and found no one there. But as he was closing the front door, he noticed that the interior lights were still on in their car parked in the driveway. He went out and discovered that a door had been left ajar, and he was glad to have discovered this so that their battery wouldn't be dead in the morning. As they were telling that story to their children the next day, one of them said, with wonder in her eyes, “Mommy, an angel rang our doorbell last night so our car battery

wouldn't die." Did an angel really ring that doorbell? I don't know. But if the cynicism of your heart is so thick that you believe such things cannot happen, then your faith will not be sufficient to receive the wonder of your salvation. Angels are the perfect choice to deliver this message.

II. The Prerequisite of Peace

The angels sing of peace on earth, but it is not the first theme of their song. **"Glory to God in the highest"** comes before peace on earth. This order is not accidental. There can be no permanent peace on the earth until the earth is centered on the glory of God. There will be no real peace in your life until you too are centered on God's glory. The earth lost its original peace, the peace in the garden of paradise, when it got off center. Several years ago on a visit to Kenya, I was with a missionary friend when the car we were riding in started vibrating violently. We got out to investigate the source of the problem and discovered that the mechanic who had just serviced his car the day before had switched his wheels for wheels that didn't fit his car. There is a hole in the middle of the wheel that is supposed to fit snugly over the end of the axle, but the hole in these different wheels was just a little bit larger than the end of the axle. That lack of a snug fit caused the wheel to go off center, resulting in an intolerable lack of peace in the car.

This order of glory to God first and peace on earth second has at least two important implications. First, it provides us with an explanation for the lack of peace in our world. We lack peace because we have left our true center in the glory of God. When Adam and Eve believed the satanic lie that true fulfillment would come only by throwing off the reign of God and doing what they wanted, they lost their personal peace, as well as throwing the entire creation off center. When people today say they want peace, what most of them mean is that they want to be left alone to pursue whatever they want. They are like the rebellious teenager who wants his parents to continue funding him in whatever he wants to do, but who doesn't want to submit himself to the authority of his parents. Our rebellious idea of peace is for God to continue giving us his good gifts of good health, prosperous economies and stable governments so that we can be free to do whatever we want. Such a path will never lead to peace.

A second implication of this order of God's glory first and peace second is that it establishes a path for true peace. That path is to rid the world of every person who is self-centered rather than God-centered. The Bible teaches everywhere that peace comes only through judgment, a judgment by which God cleanses his world of all that is not centered on his glory. But there are two judgments spoken of in the Bible. The first one is the surprising judgment of Jesus on the cross. Jesus was made sin while he hung on the cross, and he was judged by his heavenly Father. For all who trust in Jesus and follow him, our self-centered, rebellious hearts were judged in Jesus that we might enter

into the peace of a God-centered world. The second judgment comes, then, at the end of this age when all who have not accepted the judgment of their sins through Jesus will be judged by God by being given what they have always wanted: a world where they can be the center. They will find no peace there, because, as the angels know, the only world with peace is the one where the glory of God is the center. This understanding from the angels gives us an answer to the question that many people have today. Why doesn't God do something to end the terrible tragedies that continue unabated in our broken world? It is because of his mercy that he doesn't end it now. The only way to end it is through judgment of all the unrepentant self-centered, and God is holding open the door, at great cost to himself, for those unrepentant to repent and come to Jesus. Are you among that number? Then see the mercy of God and repent.

III. The Discrimination of Peace

Not everyone will experience the peace of which the angels sing. It is for **“those with whom he is pleased!”** Who are these with whom God is pleased and how did it happen that God became pleased with them? According to the commentators, the phrase “those with whom he is pleased” is “almost a technical phrase in first-century Judaism for God's elect.” In other words, it is speaking not of those who have earned God's pleasure by their good works, for such a thing is impossible to do by those with sinful natures. Rather, it refers to those who receive God's pleasure as a gift. Now that we are on this side of Jesus' death on the cross, we see that this refers to those who receive the gift of God's pleasure in them through Jesus. We don't have to wait for the final coming of God's peace at the last judgment. We can have it now.

Paul refers to this peace we can have now as a peace **“which surpasses all understanding”** (Phil. 4:7). As you may know, Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians from prison. Even when your circumstances aren't peaceful, you can have peace. Paul tells us how in the command of verse 6. **“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”** The result is the peace of God. Notice that the thanksgiving is to come with the request and not where we would expect it—with the granting of the request. Paul doesn't say, “Make your prayer requests to the Lord, and when he answers don't forget to thank him.” We are to thank God ahead of time, as we are making the request, and this is the key to experiencing his peace. How do we do that? We do it by trusting in the sovereign rule of God over our lives. We trust him and thank him because we believe he will always answer our prayers in a way that is best.

When I was planting a church in Glen Burnie, Maryland, we needed to find some property on which we could build a more permanent structure. We were conducting our land search at a time when property was hard to come by.

There was a parcel that I thought would be perfect. It had good visibility and accessibility, so I encouraged the congregation to begin praying that God would allow us to purchase this property. We even tried to make it easier for God by getting permission from the owner to have a prayer meeting on the property. The owner then ran into some financial trouble and the land was to be auctioned off. I thought that this was surely a step toward God's answer to our prayers. So we went to the auction and bid on the property. We didn't get it. What happened? God answered our prayers by saying "No" because he was acting in our best interests. Of course, I don't know what would have happened had we purchased that property. But God does, and knowing what he knows, he didn't grant us this property. I like the way Tim Keller says it. "When a child of mine makes a request, I always give that person what he or she would have asked for if they know everything I know." It is as we believe that that we have peace.

CONCLUSION:

G. K. Chesterton once said, "Poets do not go mad; but chess players do... Poetry is sane because it floats easily in an infinite sea; reason seeks to cross the infinite sea, and so make it finite. The result is mental exhaustion." Chess players are always strategizing, trying to see many moves ahead, and the options multiply exponentially. If you run your life like the chess player, there is no peace. It is simply too much for us to figure out how things should happen. There are too many unexpected events in life, events that are out of our control.

Peace is possible for the poet, however. By poet, I don't mean the person who is skilled in creating poetic compositions. I mean the person who is humble enough to recognize how much we don't understand and don't control in life. The poet leaves room for mystery. The poet knows that where literal, mathematical propositions fail, metaphor can work. Metaphors can touch us at a deep emotional level. The poet is bold enough to believe in such things as angels, virgin births, stars guiding wise men, God becoming man. These things aren't mere metaphors—they really did happen. Though I can't explain them all, I believe them nonetheless. In short, the poet is bold enough to trust God. God is the great chess player, the one who knows the infinite number of possible moves, and how each and every one will play out. We trust him with our lives, and we are filled with both peace and joy. A God who would leave the glories and safety of heaven to come to live a life of suffering, one bookended by a stable and a crucifixion with robbers, surely can be trusted. Let's trust him and thank him.