



A Song of Peace

We've been focusing on the songs of Christmas in our advent readings this year. We looked at Mary's song, Elizabeth's song and Zacharias' song. Last week we even found a Christmas song on the lips of Moses! Some of these songs may be completely foreign to you. Today we're looking at one that's a little more familiar: the angels' announcement of Jesus' birth. Although it's a familiar song, the theme of the song is something that has eluded many of us this year. You see, this is a song of peace. As I look around, I don't see a lot of people experiencing peace. I see people demoralized over the economy. I see people cynical about politics. I see people stressed about their packed schedule. I just don't see a lot of peace.

It's interesting that the angels brought this message to shepherds, men who herded livestock for a living, who were at the very bottom of the social structure. You've heard people say, "She cusses like a sailor." In those days there was a saying, "He lies like a shepherd." Fairly or unfairly, the character of a shepherd was not highly regarded. Shepherds tended to be socially inept, hygienically-challenged, and culturally reviled. Men who shepherded usually had no other work options. These angels didn't bring the message of Christ's birth to those who had influence. They didn't appear to the wealthy or to political or religious leaders. They came to the least significant, least respected, least likely people in the community. So when God's messenger said he came to bring good news for ALL people, he proved it by starting at the bottom.

First there was one angel (presumably Gabriel, who also had appeared to Mary and Zacharias), then he was joined in verse 13 with **"a multitude of the heavenly host."** That phrase means "more than could be counted." If you think one angel is scary, how'd you like to see angels spread out like stars?

Gabriel brought the news of Christ's birth in v.11: **"for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."** He gave specific instructions about when and where this Messiah was being born. The city of David is Bethlehem. A manger is something like a feed trough. And then this great company of angels brought the commentary on the news in the form of a song. This song has inspired composers for 2,000 years. It's

composed of two parts. The first part is about what this good news means for God. The second is about what it means for all of us.

I. What this good news means for God.

The first phrase is, **"Glory to God in the highest!"** This line focuses on the One who set these events in motion; who controls all events on earth; who dwells in the highest place. Of course, for the angels in heaven this is pretty much standard practice. This is pretty much what they do all day long. In the book of Revelation when we get a glimpse into heaven that's what appears to be going on all the time throughout eternity.

But here there seems to be something new. It's like because of what's about to happen, because of who this baby is, people who respond to this message will say, "Glory to God in the highest!" They'll say things like, "My life was a mess, and you gave me purpose. I used to glorify myself, but now I give glory to God." Or, "I was wandering, lost and alone. I'd been rejected by everyone I once loved and trusted. And you found me. Glory to God!" Or, "I was living my life in fear of those around me; fearful of the future. And then, because of the Son you sent, I found release from my fear. God, you're awesome!"

And really, this is what we do every Sunday. This is a big part of why we get together. We get together and sing, "Glory to God in the highest!" And at Christmas we narrow our focus in a way that allows us to do that even more. I love Christmas. I love the music, decorations, and the food. I love the corny movies, the presents and parties. But first and foremost, I love being able to focus an entire month on the coming of God to earth, what we call the "Incarnation." As Isaiah called him, "Immanuel, God with us!" I believe that if we could somehow grasp the love of God that exists right behind the Christmas story, every one of us would shout out loud, "Glory to God in the highest!"

II. What this good news means for all of us.

The second phrase tells us what this good news means for us. It says, **"Peace on earth among men with whom he is pleased."** This is the part we need to spend some time on. This reads well on a Christmas card, but deep down we wonder if it's nonsense. Peace means a lot of things

to a lot of people. What does peace mean to a soldier in Iraq? What does it mean to the mother of a colicky infant? What does it mean to a child whose parents won't stop fighting? It usually means the end of something—the end of a war; the end of nonstop crying; the end of a bitter dispute.

So what kind of peace are the angels referring to? Is there a promise here of any of the above? Let's be honest, ever since this announcement was made wars have continued to break out, babies still cry and marriages still fall apart. I'd like to promise you that because of Christmas you can have peace in all your relationships, but I can't. The Bible doesn't promise it either. Jesus said, **"Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be the members of his household"** (Matt 10:34-36). Jesus isn't speaking literally. He never wielded a sword. Here, the sword is a metaphor for division. He's saying that when we put him first in our lives, that will cause division; sometimes it will even divide families. Oswald Chambers wrote, "The coming of Jesus is not a peaceful thing; it is a disturbing thing, because it means the destruction of every peace that is not based on a personal relationship to Himself."

This doesn't mean that we were supposed to go around and try to create division. Some Christians are like that. They seem to think "disturbing the peace" is their personal mission. But Jesus said **"Blessed are the peacemakers"** (Matt 5:9). And the apostle Paul wrote, **"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone"** (Rom 12:18). The problem is, it's not always possible. We all know people that thrive on conflict. If they don't have any, they create some on the spot. Then there are people and groups who are so filled with selfish interests and hate that they think nothing of taking for themselves what belongs to another. It's wishful thinking to believe that because of Jesus we'll never experience interpersonal conflict or be free from conflict between nations.

It appears the peace the angels were talking about is something altogether different. The peace that only Jesus can bring is a personal, permanent kind of peace—peace between self-absorbed, willful, rebellious people like you and me, and the holy God. That's why they declare that this peace is **"among men with whom he is pleased."** Don't miss that! First and foremost, the angels are singing about a peace that flows out of a relationship with God where somehow you know that you please him; a relationship that once was broken but now has been healed. You see, the peace of God in our hearts flows out of knowing we have peace with God. The Bible says this peace with God comes

only through trusting in Christ as Savior. That's how we become pleasing to him. It's not by trying to be good. It's not through religion. It's by embracing for yourself the very reason God sent his Son in the first place: to die for you; to save you; to rescue you. And when you experience that, when his peace invades your life, that changes everything.

I think we sometimes put too much emphasis on receiving the good news of Jesus just so we can spend eternity with God. That's a fantastic truth, but it's only part of the truth. The whole truth is that in this song, we're being told of the opportunity for God to bring his peace into our everyday lives, and that includes our past, our present, and our future.

III. The good news brings peace from our past.

This good news brings peace from our past. A lot of us are tormented by our past. If there is anything in your past that still causes you shame, embarrassment, or guilt, this song promises you can be at peace. Why is that? Because the Bible says, **"as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us"** (Ps 103:12). The slate is wiped clean with God. All things are new with him. We don't get much snow around here, but have you ever seen how fresh snowfall can cover the dirtiest ground and make it fresh and pure and clean? Isaiah says, **"Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow"** (1:18). If there is anything in your past that brings you regret and shame, it's covered with a fresh blanket of snow.

Then again, there may be something in your past that brings you sadness, grief, or loneliness. This song also promises you can be at peace with all that has taken place. Many years ago Amy Carmichael wrote a poem about this:

*He said, 'I will forget the dying faces;
The empty places,
They shall be filled again.
O voices mourning deep within me, cease.'
But vain the word; vain, vain;
Not in forgetting lieth peace.*

*He said, 'I will crowd action upon action,
The strife of faction
Shall stir me and sustain;
O tears that drown the fire of manhood, cease.'
But vain the word; vain, vain;
Not in endeavor lieth peace.*

*He said 'I will withdraw me and be quiet,
Why meddle in life's riot?
Shut be my door to pain.
Desire, thou dost befool me, thou shalt cease.'*

*But vain the word; vain, vain;
Not in aloofness lieth peace.*

*He said, 'I will accept the breaking sorrow
Which God tomorrow
Will to His son explain.'
Then did the turmoil deep within him cease.
Not vain the word, not vain;
For in acceptance lieth peace.*

You see, there is peace that comes by acceptance; acceptance that grows out of a faith that whatever sorrow this God chooses to bring into my life is for a purpose; that even the darkest threads of my past will one day make sense. "Which God tomorrow will to His son explain."

IV. The good news brings peace in the present.

The good news also brings peace in the present. When the baby in the Christmas story was at the end of his life, he said to his followers in John 14:27, "**I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart! And the peace I give isn't fragile like the peace the world gives. So don't be troubled or afraid.**"

He tells us that the peace he gives isn't the same as the peace the world gives. Our world promises peace in a number of ways. We're bombarded with advertisements that promise we'll know peace if we just buy the right products. Drugs and alcohol lie by suggesting that getting high is the way to find peace. Many of us believe that real peace would come if we just had financial security. Still others try to convince us that peace is found only in independence, never being committed to anyone or anything. We're so bombarded by the peace the world offers that we fail to understand the peace proclaimed by the angels and promised by Jesus himself.

We often think of peace as being without trials and troubles—the absence of pain and suffering and heartache. That kind of peace can't be sustained in this world. We need a peace that transcends circumstances; that allows us to have a peaceful heart in the midst of the chaos that defines contemporary life.

A woman visited the Middle East during a time of war. She was in a field and watched a shepherd caring for his sheep near where guns were being fired. Every time the shots rang out the sheep scattered in fear. But then the shepherd would touch each of them with his staff and speak calmly to them, and the sheep settled down immediately. They trusted the shepherd. And then another shot sounded, and the same routine happened. Each time the sheep needed the shepherd to touch them and to reassure them they were safe.

If we stay close to our Shepherd, we can have peace in the present no matter what's happening around us because he'll reach out and touch us with his staff and speak to us words of comfort and calm.

V. The good news brings peace for the future.

Finally, the angels' song gives us the hope of peace for the future. Anxiety about the future rob us of peace and tranquility today. Do any of these thoughts sound familiar: What if my child dies? What if my company goes under? What if I lose my health or my job? What if my spouse leaves me? What if the economy gets worse? The truth is that any of those things could happen to any of us. However, dwelling on our worst fears does nothing to prevent them. It robs us of our sleep, our health, our joy, and our peace of mind today.

Have you ever considered that the world didn't dramatically change after Jesus was born? From the time of Jesus until today, there has never been a single day without war on this planet. Washington D.C. has a lot of peace monuments; we build one after every war! Many people are hopeful that a new leader will bring needed change, but there's never been a government that's broken the bondage of sin that constantly expresses itself in individual lives and society as a whole. Human cruelty and lack of regard for the sanctity of life has always been with us and it always will be until Christ returns.

In Revelation 5 John has a vision of heaven where he sees God holding a book in his right hand. This book was written on the inside and on the back and sealed with seven seals. An angel shouts, "**Who is worthy to open the book and to break its seals?**" No one was found anywhere worthy enough to open the book and look into it. This was a big problem and John began weeping, literally "he wept and wept and wept." What kind of book is this? Why is it so important that it be opened and read? This book is symbolic. Scholars agree this book contains within it the unknown future. It's a book of destiny that tells what God is going to do upon the earth. It's so important that it's opened because when it is God's purposes will be unleashed and put into effect. If it's not opened God's righteous purposes won't be carried out.

Then someone leans over and says something to John. He knows something John doesn't. He says, "**Stop crying! There is one who has overcome. He's the lion from Judah, the Root of David.**" Then there is this very strange twist in the story. All heaven stands on tiptoe waiting for the entrance of this strong lion, the symbol of power and regality. But instead of a lion what does John see? He sees a lamb; a weak, bloodied lamb. You mean "that" is the one with the power and authority to open the book? Absolutely!

Then the lamb walks over to the throne and takes the book out of God's right hand. This is a symbolic act. It's only through the sacrifice of the lamb, Jesus Christ, that God's victorious purposes can be carried out. So when Jesus takes the book all of heaven breaks out into choruses of praise. Thousands of angels sing, "**Worthy is the lamb...**"

That's why Jesus said, "**I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world**" (John 16:33). You see, we can have peace when we think about the future because we know the One who opens the books and holds the future in his hands.

CONCLUSION

We can have the peace of God in our hearts because we know the God of peace. He is Lord of our past, present and future. That's the good news of Christmas. If we could get a glimpse of heaven today we would still hear the angels singing, "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased." You can have peace no matter what you're going through. When your soul is at peace with God, the peace of God will guard your heart and give you the capacity to endure any crisis, any tragedy, any misfortune.