

Lori Lower, ABC Advent Sermon, 12-10-17

This is the second week of advent, with the focus on Peace – and the anticipated arrival of the “Prince of Peace.” [Light the advent candles of Hope and Peace.]

PEACE: Do You Have It?

Luke 2:8-20

Today, as we take a look at peace, I want you to recall a memory or an idea of what you picture in your mind when you think about “Christmas Peace.”

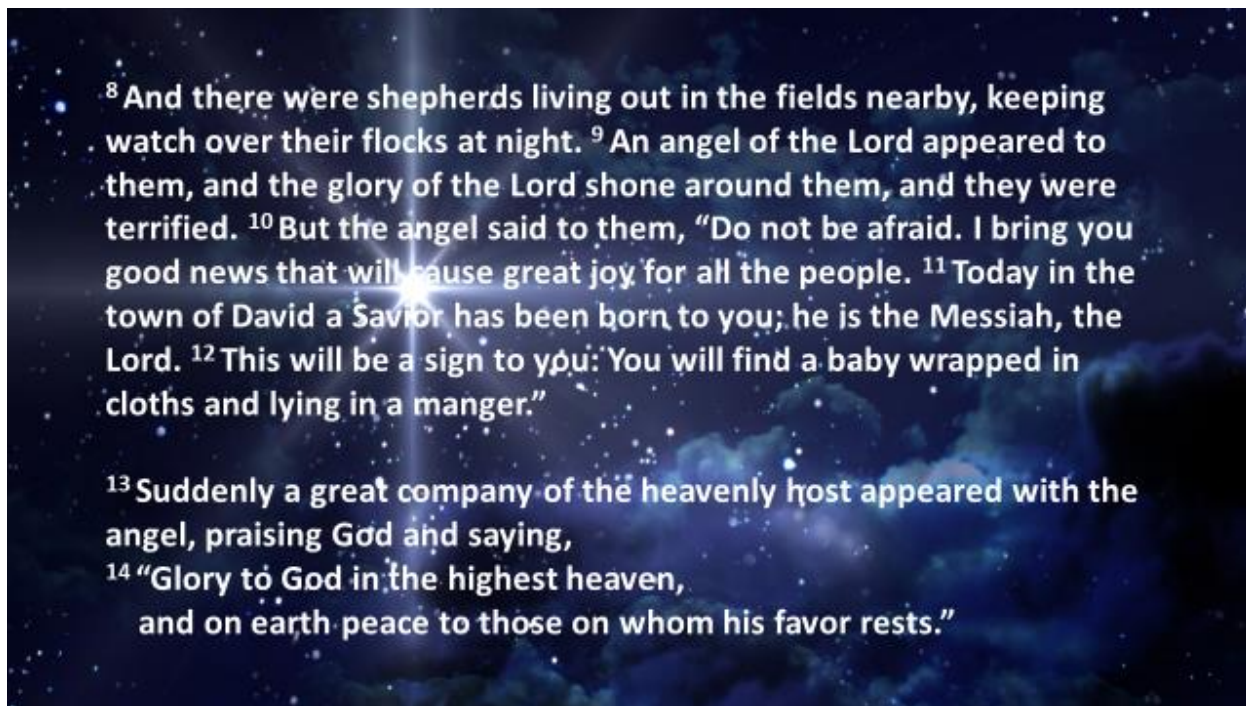
Perhaps you’re thinking about the lyrics to “It Came Upon The Midnight Clear”? Peace on the earth, good will to men...

So, imagine if you will.... this scene...



It's nighttime, near Bethlehem - it could be just after the sky turned to night or it could be midnight. It's dark, the sky is clear and the stars are "brightly shining." The shepherds are settling in for the night - some are sleeping while others are on guard duty. You might hear a few baa's from the sheep as they too are resting. Maybe there's a jingle of a bell - I'm not sure if the sheep had bells back then... but All in all - it's peaceful.

Let's look at the first part of our scripture from the book of Luke, chapter 2, verses 8-14:



I don't know about you, but my peaceful night out with the shepherds was just shattered by the appearance of first, an Angel of the Lord, and then the heavenly hosts - the angels of the armies of heaven as the New Living Translation puts it, with the announcement of Christ's birth and then the pronouncement of peace on earth. The shepherds were terrified and rightly so. Wouldn't you be, too?

If I were one of those shepherds, first I'd be pinching myself to see if I was awake or even still alive! Then when the shock wore off, I would be wondering about this strange announcement of the birth of a baby, the Messiah? Next, I'd be asking myself - what did they mean when they said (or sang) 'peace on earth to those on whom his favor rests or with whom God is pleased?'

I think a bit of background about these particular shepherds might be in order here, then we'll come back around to 'peace on earth.'

While preparing for this message, I came across some ideas about the sheep and the shepherds that I don't remember hearing before, and perhaps you haven't either. Most of us recall hearing about David and how he was a shepherd when God called him to become the King of Israel. The area around Bethlehem was where he spent his time in the fields. So first of all it is fitting that the birthplace of our Savior & King, our Shepherd, would be in Bethlehem. That, plus the fact that Joseph

(& Mary) were of the line of the house of David, the line from which the promised Messiah would come and they were in Bethlehem because of the required census.

But this next tidbit I found interesting - the sheep that grazed around Bethlehem were probably not just ordinary sheep. Because of the proximity of these fields to Jerusalem, the sheep raised here were intended to be temple sheep - the lambs (sheep) that would be sacrificed on the altar to atone for sin. Do you see the correlation to Jesus, born in Bethlehem, being the lamb, the Son of God, whose life was sacrificed in order to bring atonement for sin for all who believe in Him?

So what does this have to do with the shepherds? Because of their work, they were considered to be ceremonially unclean. They were required to assist with the birthing of the lambs, which meant coming into contact with blood - one reason, in Jewish society, for being unclean, but also for taking care of the ones that died, a second reason for being unclean. And not only that, because they had to stay constantly with their flocks for weeks at a time, their work did not allow them to go to the temple so that they themselves could be cleansed. No wonder they were considered outcasts by the society around them.

Yet God chose them to be the bearers of the message from the angels about the birth of Jesus! They were so excited about the news that I don't think any of them had time to remember that they were ceremonially unclean. All we know is that they did what the angels said - found Mary and Joseph and the baby - and then told everyone they came in contact with - that the Messiah had been born in Bethlehem!

So what does all this have to do with *peace*?

Peace is a word that has been used, sometimes flippantly in our society, without a whole lot of thought. We've all probably heard the beauty contestant who breathlessly says "All I want is world peace." Or consider this quote I found by Anthony Bourdain, a chef and TV personality, who said

***"Barbecue may not be the road to world peace,
but it's a start."***

Anthony Bourdain

You know, there really could be some truth in that...

So let's explore the definition of peace.

PEACE

... a state of tranquility or quiet, such as freedom from civil disturbance. ... freedom from disquieting or oppressive thoughts or emotions; mental calm or serenity; harmony in personal relations; it can be used to ask for silence or calm or as a greeting or farewell.

Some dictionary definitions say that peace is - a state of tranquility or quiet, such as freedom from civil disturbance or a state of security or order within a community - as in the absence of war. Peace can also mean freedom from disquieting or oppressive thoughts or emotions; mental calm or serenity; harmony in personal relations; a state or period of mutual concord between governments, such as a pact to end hostilities, and finally it can be used to ask for silence or calm or as a greeting or farewell.

However, none of these definitions get at the meaning of true, biblical peace or “shalom.”

The Hebrew word for peace is shalom, with the Greek equivalent being eirine.

PEACE

Shalom

שלום

Eirene

εἰρήνη

Shalom brings with it a sense of completeness, soundness, welfare or well-being. So to “make” shalom, using it as a verb, is to restore to completeness or wholeness.

Therefore in the context of the Luke passage, shalom peace refers to the restoration of the relationship between God and man - “and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”

Our Old Testament passage in Micah refers to the coming of the ruler or leader (out of Bethlehem) who will lead his “flock,” and He will be the source of Peace. Isaiah 9:6 refers to him as the Prince of Peace.

You may have noticed the new banners in here and out in the lobby; they show part of Isaiah 9:6. I was joking with the worship design team the other night that we needed to buy a couple more banners in order to get the whole verse.

⁶For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Therefore, Jesus, the baby born as the Messiah, will bring shalom - making complete or whole by restoring us (humans) back to a right relationship with God, which was the intent of God from the creation of the earth.

Peace is then - a right relationship between oneself and God

Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk who is one of my favorite devotional writers, said

***“Man is not at peace with his fellow man
because he is not at peace with himself;
he is not at peace with himself, because
he is not at peace with God.”***

Thomas Merton

Now the question is this –

Peace: Do You Have It?

If you have accepted Christ as your Lord and Savior, by believing that he came into this world as a baby, God in human flesh, that he lived and breathed as a human, yet sacrificed his life – bled his blood for the redemption and salvation of your soul (our souls) to restore the broken relationship between you and God – with the future promise of shalom – complete and full relationship with God, then yes, you should be able to say, “I have peace.”

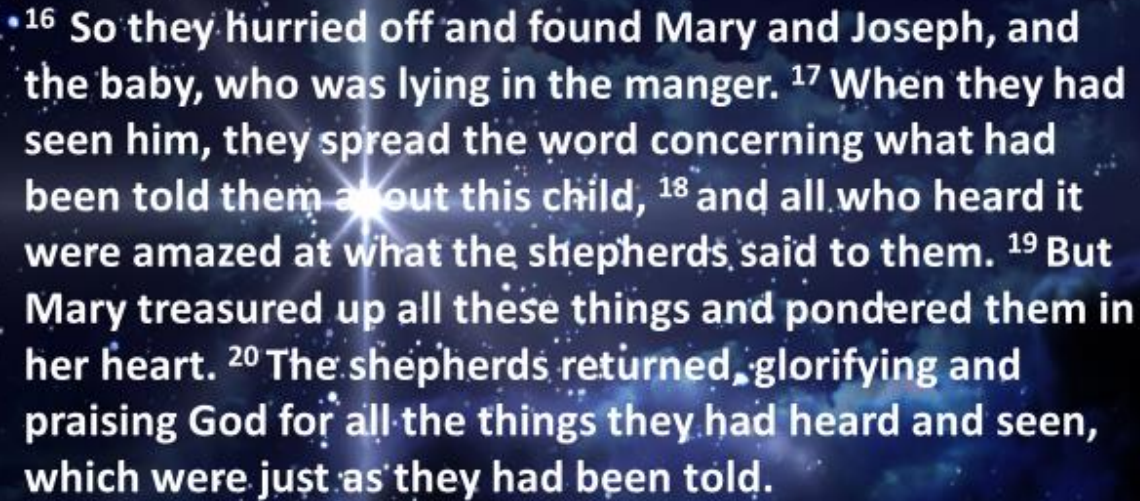
However, if you have not taken the opportunity to surrender your heart, your life – and accept this gift from God, I urge you, today – to take this step of faith. To acknowledge that you are a sinner, broken and in need of restoration, and invite him to take control of your life and accept *His* peace.

And if you have already done this, but – for whatever reason – you feel that you do not have peace with God, perhaps this is a time to make a recommitment? To realign yourself with God’s purpose and direction for your life?

If this is where you see yourself at this moment in your life and you desire to make either of these decisions and want guidance, please see either me or Pastor Keith after the service. Or come to the prayer corner, where the pray-ers are willing to walk you through the steps toward a right relationship with God.

I repeat: Peace: Do You Have It?

Now, then the question before us is: What should our response be to this peace? Let’s continue in the Luke 2 passage, verses 16-20.



16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. 17 When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Our first response to peace be should be that it



Peace: Brings Out Our Witness for God

If we have accepted the peace of Christ in our own lives, then shouldn't we want to be as bold, and perhaps as reckless as the shepherds (who in the eyes of the world were unclean and unworthy), in telling others about this gift that God gave to us? In John 14:27 Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

After the recent Jay Smith event, and hearing about how he witnesses to and debates with Muslims, I've had a few conversations with some of you about how we, as the church and as Christ-followers,

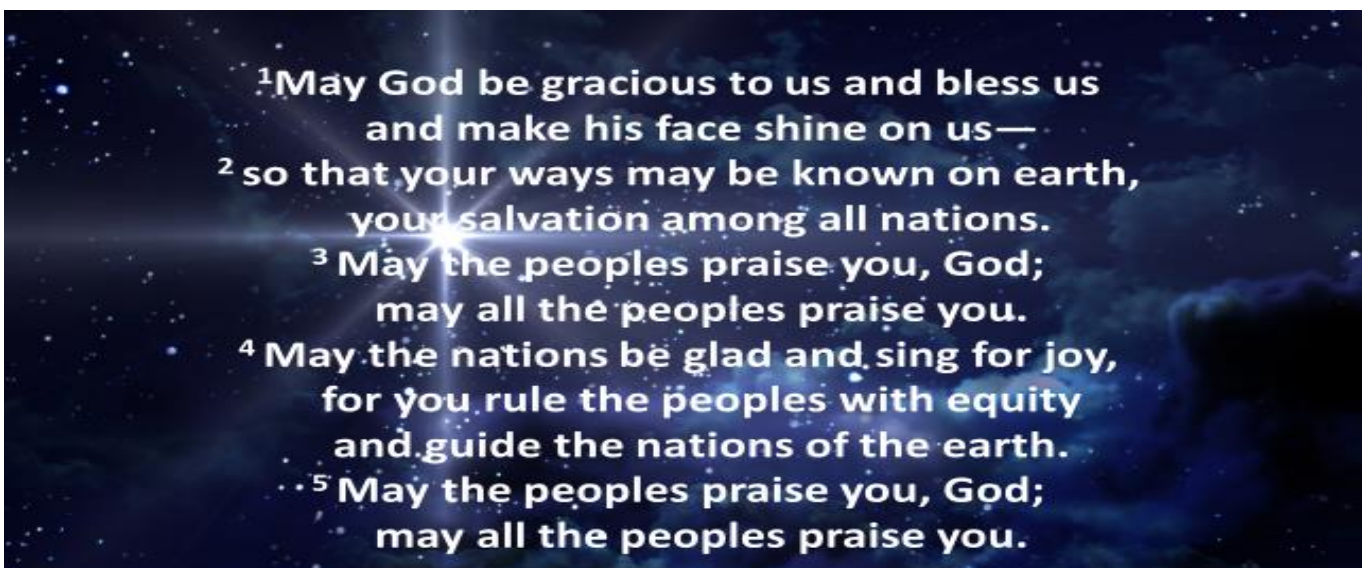
should be more bold in telling others about what God has done for us. We need to be telling the story of God in our lives. The whole story – not just the Christmas story. I know I need to be more forthcoming with what God has done in my life. Remember that our words may open the way for the life-changing grace and peace of God to impact lives all around us.

The second response is that...



Both Mary and the shepherds demonstrated their praise to the Lord for the coming of Jesus, the peace of the world, albeit in very different ways. The shepherds knew that they had received a special message from God and had been given the privilege to be the first to see the promised child. We should also be praising God for coming *for us* at what we call the first Christmas, as well as for His promise to return to earth again to ultimately restore shalom peace.

Psalms 67 says



In this time of advent and this festive season, we can celebrate the hope, peace, joy, and love that was given to us through the cradle of the baby Jesus, but let's not forget to celebrate the hope, peace, joy, and love that we receive because of Jesus' work on the cross. We cannot have the cross without the cradle.

Let us leave here today, not only thanking and praising God for the gift of Christmas – Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, but for His gift that keeps on giving – through the death, burial and resurrection of Christ and the promise of a fully-restored peace, shalom, when He comes to reign forever.

Let's Pray:

God, we thank and praise you for the peace of Christmas and what that truly means for those of us who follow you. We ask for your spirit to infuse our lives so that we may live with boldness, telling others about the peace that passes all understanding. May we live our lives in such a way that, as Peter says ¹⁵ "But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."

Amen

Benediction: Consider these verses in Colossians (1:19-20) about the Prince of Peace

"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 peace by the blood of his cross."

Go and share the peace of Christ and Christmas with those around you today!