

Glory to God and on Earth Peace
Luke 2:8-20
December 24, 2021
Rev. Dave Dorst
CenterPoint Church

Introduction

The year was 1914 and the setting was a farm on the French/German border. That farm had been transformed into a battlefield as part of the first World War. German, French and Scottish soldiers were in their separate trenches, engaging in periodic gunfire, seeking to kill as many of the enemy forces as they could. But Christmas Eve arrived while they were still hunkered down, and the tension mounted as they wondered how much they could celebrate the holiday in the middle of a war zone. A Scottish soldier fired up his bagpipes on one side of the line, and his fellow Scots began to sing along. At the conclusion of the song, a famous German opera singer began to sing “Silent Night” on the other side of the warzone. The bagpipes joined his song and every soldier from both sides could hear that song being performed by enemies. The singer stood up so that people could hear him leading the song better and one of the French soldiers got him in his rifle’s sites; but then he lowered his gun. “Silent Night” made way for “O Come All Ye Faithful.” As that song ended, the commanders of the three armies met in the middle of no man’s land to discuss a Christmas Eve truce. “The outcome of this war won’t be decided tonight. I don’t think anyone would criticize us for laying down our rifles on Christmas Eve.” The soldiers wandered out of their barracks and shared hellos, drinks, and pictures of their wives. The evening ended in a worship service.

Christmas morning came and each side waited to see if fighting or a continuation of the truce would occur. The commanders shared coffee, agreed to another day of ceasefire to allow all sides to bury their dead. A football game broke out with soldiers from each army joining in. For two days, just two days, the bloody warfare of that war came to a halt as soldiers from both sides shared Christmas together. This was a historical event, but if you want to see a dramatized version of it, the movie is called “Joyeux Noel” (“Merry Christmas” in English), released in 2005.

Christmas is a time that we like to talk about peace. If it’s possible for enemy soldiers who are trying to kill each other to lay down their guns, it’s possible for anyone to make peace with their enemies and seek forgiveness and love. We see the phrase “peace on earth” all over Christmas cards and church plays, but is this the kind of peace that was promised in that first Christmas time? As we read our text this morning, we hear that angels declared that God is worthy of our glory because He was sending a Savior to earth, and that as a result there would be peace. Let’s work through the text and see exactly what the angels were promising there.

I. The Sign of the Angel (vv. 8-14)

⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

This passage comes right after the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, where His parents had gone to register for the census, even though they lived in a different town. So why did this scene have to happen? Why did angels have to tell anyone about this birth? It's already happening; the shepherds aren't medical professions who can help with the mother or child after the birth, and they're can't help Joseph and Mary with housing or raising the kid. What's going on here? Jesus' birth happened, but it had to be explained. Anyone looking at Jesus and His parents would just think, "Huh, bad timing with the whole having a baby while you're travelling, but he's awfully cute. Hope you get home OK." There would have been nothing telling them this was a special baby, this was a baby that had been prophesied throughout the Scriptures. Nobody was putting that together on their own, it had to be revealed to them!

So angels appear to shepherds. We've heard this story so many times, that just rolls off our ears, like yeah, of course, angels and shepherds, that's one of the stories from Christmas. But back up and try to be amazed by how crazy that scene is. Shepherds were one of the lowest groups of people in society. Actually, they weren't really part of society, they were mostly kept away from society; just one step up from lepers. If you tended sheep, you were dirty, smelly, and unclean; the respectable people looked down on you. It was assumed that you were a thief and a liar, so your testimony was not allowed in a court of law.¹ Did God send His angels to tell the royal court, the temple priests, or the movers and shakers in Israel about this amazing, history-defining birth? No, He sent His messengers to appear to the riff-raff, the outcasts. Mary had sung in her song that God had "*exalted those of humble estate*" (Luke 1:52) and this was a clear fulfillment. The shepherds were nobodies, but thankfully, God loves nobodies.

First the angel appeared alone and had to calm down the shepherds who were probably scared out their wits by his showing up in the sky out of nowhere. Then he made it clear that his announcement was a huge deal; he didn't just say, "Go find this baby and await further instructions there." No, he told them how important the news was – it's a huge deal, the Messiah who had been promised to Israel was finally arriving! This is the only time the phrase "*a Savior who is Christ the Lord*" is used in the Gospels, and possibly the only time that all of these titles were brought together – Savior, Christ, and Lord. Savior indicates His role as Deliverer, Christ indicates that He is the Messiah, the anointed One of God, and Lord indicates that He is in control, the sovereign authority.

Verse 12 – there was to be a sign. What kind of sign would be appropriate for the birth of a king – a huge feast taking over several city blocks? A parade down the street with onlookers bowing low? The army marching in procession and all the subordinate governors and generals swearing fealty to the new king? Fireworks, front-page headlines in the newspaper? No. It's just swaddling cloths and a manger. Doesn't seem like much, does it? It's interesting that Isaiah 7:14 had promised a sign to all Israel hundreds of years beforehand: "*Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel.*" So, a sign for history is the virgin birth and the divine child would be known as Immanuel, which means "God with us." For the shepherds, they receive that sign as well, but they just needed a sign to tell them which baby is the Christ child – it's the one that will be lying in a feeding trough in a cave in Bethlehem.

First it was one angel speaking to the shepherds instructing them of the magnitude of the event that were happening. Then a "multitude of the heavenly host" appeared. Kent Hughes imagines that it's "not just 50 or 150 or 1,500 angels that appeared, but heavenly hosts beyond count... every one of

¹ Philip Ryken, *Luke, Volume 1* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), p. 77.

God's angels was there because this was the most amazing event that had ever happened in the entire universe."²

This pronouncement was followed by the shepherd's immediate obedience.

II. The Arrival of the Shepherds (vv. 15-17)

¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.

I don't know if they just abandoned their sheep and neglected their duties, but these shepherds made haste to follow the angel's instructions and find the baby and his family. Since verse 8 says that they were in the same region and the angel told them the baby was in the city of David, they must have made their way to every place that had a feeding trough in Bethlehem. It doesn't sound like they had a hard time finding the right place. I'm sure they were still breathless when they arrived at the manger. Joseph and Mary were probably looking at them like, "Who are you and why are you here?" Verse 17 says "*they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.*"

What a great reminder that this is what a heart full of awe and wonder does – it spreads the good news. Those who have received the message of salvation, who have experienced God's truth in their lives pass it along and make it known to others. You and I have been given the greatest gift, and God asks us to share that gift with those who haven't received it yet. Invite them into the grace and salvation that we've been privileged to share. We're nobodies like the shepherds, but nobodies who are royal ambassadors carrying the most important message from our King.

Finally, we see

III. The Response of All Who Were Witnesses (vv. 18-20)

¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

When we started our study of the Gospel of Luke, you may recall that as Luke carefully investigated and interviewed people about Jesus' life, one of his sources was likely Mary herself. She would have remembered all of these details because she "*treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.*" Those are two actions that should speak to us: treasuring and pondering. Treasuring up something is to value it, to believe it, to hold on to it by faith. To ponder things is to continue to think about them, to continue to work them out. This is important both for those who are already believers and for those who are investigating Christianity and still learning. We should all be ready to treasure and believe the things that we've understood, and we should be willing to ponder, to continue to think about and learn more about things that we don't understand yet.³ It's interesting because later in the Gospels, it seems that Mary was still trying to figure out who Jesus was. At times, it seems that she opposed His calling. But she followed Him to His death and was among the early church who gathered to worship. We should be full of faith enough that we treasure and cling to what we understand to be true about God, the Scriptures, and salvation. But we should also be humble enough to admit that we don't know it all, but that it's worth studying and pondering to get

² R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), p. 90.

³ Ryken, p. 85.

a better understanding. That's what theology is: theo – God, ology – the study of. Let us investigate more, discover more, so that we can have a stronger, bolder, more informed faith.

The shepherds are just overjoyed, so thankful and excited about what they had seen and heard, happy to be included in the huge plans of God in His acts of redemption. Speaking of the shepherds, there's a quick phrase that we all skip right over in the text, the second half of verse 8 – *“keeping watch over their flock by night.”* Why should we stop and not just skip right over it? Because you don't usually tend sheep at night, you do it during the day and then bring them into the sheepfolds at night. Commentators think that this indicates that these sheep were the ones that would be used in the temple sacrifice, that's why they were tended at night, to keep them away from other sheep and keep them unblemished. And then the angels came to tell the shepherds about a Man who would be born and ultimately become the *“Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”* (John 1:29) by becoming the ultimate sacrifice on our behalf.⁴

Conclusion

So let's go back to that idea of “peace on earth” that we started with. Notice that that's not exactly what the Scripture says. It says, *“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”* It doesn't say “peace on earth” as if there was or will be an end to global conflicts. Remember that even though there was a Christmas Truce in 1914, the soldiers went back to the trenches and killing each other for the rest of that war. Even the name of that war – “The War to End All Wars” – became ironic when the next World War started up 20 years later. Not to mention that the last two thousand years have seen an overwhelming amount of violence, armed conflict, mass murder, and ethnic cleansing. If God was intending by sending Jesus to usher in peace on earth, meaning no more wars would happen, it hasn't worked. But maybe the angels weren't talking about wars and earthly conflicts.

The angel actually said, *“peace among those with whom he is pleased.”* How can you be one of those whom God is pleased with? You clean up your act, you become a righteous, holy person who lives like a monk? Nope, Romans 8:8 says that *“Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”* There is a war, and it is a war between humans and God that we started. Turn to Colossians 1 – verse 21 says, *“And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds.”* In our natural state, we choose enmity, strife with God.

So, how do we get peace with God? We can only have peace through someone who makes peace on our behalf. The next verse in Colossians 1 (v. 22) says, *“He has now reconciled in His body of flesh by His death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before Him.”* That word “reconciled” means to bring two parties that are separated together. That's what Jesus' death does. When we back up to verses 19-20, we see that *“For in Him (Jesus) 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.”* How do you get peace with God? Jesus shed His blood for you and you accept it as the payment for the penalty of your sins. Then you are pleasing in God's sight, He bestows His favor on you, and you are now the fulfillment of the angel's words that Jesus brings peace!

Does Jesus bring salvation to every person? Hebrews 7:25 says, *“He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.”* He is

⁴ Dr. James C. Martin, December 22 Devotional in *Daily Devotionals for the Season of Advent* from the CS Lewis Institute (CSLI Press, 2021).

able to save those who draw near to God through Him. But that is clearly not everyone. He does not save those who reject Him. John 3:16 – *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that **whoever believes in Him** should not perish but have eternal life.”* Salvation is readily available to you if you believe in Him as Your Savior and Lord. You have to open the gift of salvation to find the Savior inside. You cannot cast it aside and say that either you don’t need saving (because your sin is not a problem) or that you will be saving yourself through self-improvement and greater effort, or finding salvation through some other means or person. But none of those ways is going to get you peace with God and salvation. God has told us: Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through Him (John 14:6). Amen.

Benediction - 1 John 5:20-21 – *“And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.”*