

Peace on Earth

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Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup> This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup> All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup> Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. <sup>5</sup> He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup> And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

<sup>8</sup> In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup> to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” <sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup> “Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

<sup>15</sup> When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.”

<sup>16</sup> So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup> When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

## PEACE ON EARTH

The crowd waited in hushed anticipation as dusk turned to night.

Finally, a voice came over the loudspeaker and welcomed us to Disney's festival of lights.

Someone flipped a switch, and all the lights came on.

The crowd applauded.

It was that impressive.

And to make it even more spectacular,  
the lights began to pulse in rhythm to the glorious music that they played.

I was happy to see the lights one more time.

They bring out the kid in me.

But, my favorite lights are still the ones from Arkansas.

Toward the end of the street the globe lit up, the little angels flickered in the darkness, and the age old hope was proclaimed,

“Peace on Earth.”

That was God's message to the world long ago.

And it's still a message that resonates today.

Peace on Earth.

In a world filled with violence and mistrust we need light to shine in our darkness.

We need peace.

We need good will.

We need God's blessing.

We need a word of hope.

## FEAR OF THE LORD

I wonder what the glory looked like when God made this promise to the shepherds long ago. Was it like someone flipped a heavenly light switch?

Maybe.

The Bible tells us that the dark night sky was suddenly filled with the light of God's promise.

And this light show was like nothing anyone has seen before or since.

This was no commercial light show.

There were no hidden Mickeys.

And the shepherds did NOT applaud.

No, this was the glory of the Lord.

And the shepherds ... they were terrified.

Some lights are too bright for any of us to bear.

Some lights bear witness to the one light of the Creator of heaven and earth.

That's the light the shepherds saw that night.

There's an odd relationship between fear and worship in the Bible. In fact, in the Bible we read in many places that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

In the church we sometimes try to downplay the fear factor, even when it's the fear of the Lord.

It's understandable.

We know that God is love.

And we are well aware that some people use fear to misrepresent the true nature of God

But, we cannot lose sight of the fearful nature of the holy.

I've been here for quite a few years now, and every Christmas we've had the same solo, O Holy Night. People insist that we do it.

One reason of course is that Jeannie does a great job with that music.

But, there's another reason too.

That song gets at the holiness of the moment.

"Fall on your knees.

O hear the angel voices."

Even the brightest Christmas light are not bright enough to tell the tale. Somehow we have to get a glimpse of glory. Somehow we have to learn to fall on our knees and hear the angel's voices.

Faith begins on our knees.

Faith begins when the night sky lights up with the glory of the Lord and we are afraid.

## A PROMISE

But that's not all.

There is more to worship than the fear of the Lord.

When we're on our knees, we also hear the Lord's promise.

The angel told the terrified shepherds.

"Don't be afraid.

I'm bringing you good news, good news for the whole world. This very day a Savior is born in the city of David.

God's glory is coming to earth."

And as if the heavenly light show wasn't enough, suddenly the whole sky is filled with angels all singing a powerful song together,

"Glory to God in the highest and on earth ... peace ... goodwill."

## PEACE IN A TIME OF FEAR

Can you imagine a world filled with peace and goodwill?

It's hard to imagine, especially in this day and time.

Technology is good in that it connects us with friends far and near.

But, technology is also bad because it connects us with enemies far and near.

And it keeps us in constant contact with our deepest fears.

We always live in earshot of the drumbeat of war.

Pundits and politicians always want to remind us that we're not safe.

Fear, not fear of the Lord, but fear of what men and women might do to us dominate the news on our phones, our tablets, our computers and our TVs.

You can't get away from it.

They didn't have social media when Jesus was born, but they did know fear.

They knew the fear of those who would crucify you if you stepped out of line. They knew the fear of those who required you to leave home and pay almost all you had in taxes.

(You may have noticed that this is how our story started tonight ... with the holy couple leaving home because the government required a census. This government wanted to make sure that they got their unfair share of taxes.)

And it was into this arena of economic and personal insecurity that the light of God shone on the world.

#### THE LOWLY LIFTED UP

The light didn't come to the movers and shakers, the Herods or the Caesars. The light came to shepherds keeping watch.

From what I've read these shepherds didn't have lot of money or influence. They were definitely on the lower rung of the social ladder.

If I would try to think of a modern equivalent of a shepherd, I would say the shepherds are like hard working immigrants.

You know the ones.  
Those who do the dirty jobs no one else will do.

Some are not documented and are hired for less than minimum wage. Sometimes they aren't even paid. They can't complain. They have no rights.

These are the shepherds working the night shift in the middle of nowhere. And God chose them to be the first to hear the message.

I wonder why?

Last Sunday I mentioned Mary's song. When Mary heard that she was going to bear God's Son, all of sudden the gospel became a musical.

Sweet little Mary sang a song.

But, when you listen closely, you hear that it's a protest song. Her song is about revolution.

Mary saw a new world was coming.

In Mary's song the high and mighty are knocked off their high horse. And the poor and lowly are lifted up.

And maybe the word coming to shepherds in the field was that promise beginning to be fulfilled.

The lowly shepherds are the first to hear.  
They are lifted up and shown the light of creation.  
They hear the good news.

A Savior is born.  
God has come to earth.

#### SALVATION IN A STALL

But, God has not come to earth in a flash of blinding light or a chorus of angels.

The heavenly host point the shepherds to Bethlehem, the city of David. In that place a child is born, a Savior

God has come to earth in the birth of a little baby boy in a cattle stall.

If the movers and shakers heard a story like that, they would laugh out loud.

They wouldn't believe. They couldn't believe.  
Those who love power and privilege don't usually see a need for salvation.

And they certainly couldn't imagine salvation coming from a homeless couple starting their family in a barn.

Those losers?  
How could salvation come through them?  
Ridiculous.

But, shepherds would hear this story in a different way.  
They are more than willing to connect the glory of heaven with a humble birth.  
No doubt they too were born and lived in humble circumstances.

For them this story is good news, the best news of all.  
 God's kingdom is coming, and it's not coming from the top down.

It's coming from the bottom up.

The shepherds have to see for themselves.  
 They rush to Bethlehem and find the babe wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger, a feeding trough for the animals.

And then they know.  
 This is the sign.  
 The message of the angels is true.

### GOOD NEWS PROCLAIMED

This is good news for everyone.  
 Things are going to change in the world.  
 God's glory and God's peace are coming down to earth.

They breathlessly tell everyone who will listen what it all means.

And the news falls on receptive ears.  
 There is great joy in Bethlehem that night.

Finally, when the shepherds return home, they are changed men.

They praise God for all that they had seen and heard.  
 They will never be able to look at a baby or the night sky in the same way again.

### TREASURE AND PONDER

The Bible tells us that Mary treasured the words of encouragement spoken to her by the shepherds that night, and she pondered them in her heart.

She treasured.  
 And she pondered.  
 Maybe that suggests a good way for us to respond to the message.

We treasure the message of peace on earth and good will.  
 We give thanks for what God has done in Christ.  
 We give thanks for the good news

But, we do more than treasure those words.  
We also ponder how God might use this message to change our world.

Where would God have us go?  
What would God have us see?

What would it take for us to go home praising God and rejoicing?

LET IT BEGIN WITH ME

If we truly believe that God was in Christ and the message of the angels was peace on earth, then that message requires us to do something.

It requires us to tell the message to others in word and deed.

We have another tradition in our church.  
The Sunday after Christmas the choir sings,

“Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.”

And the congregation joins in ... in perfect harmony.  
Well, maybe not perfect harmony, but somehow it works.

The Sunday after Christmas is a good time to remember.

Peace is not a pipe dream.  
Peace is God’s dream.

In Christ that reality came down to earth.

And ever since God has been lighting up the world with a joy and a peace that passes all understanding.

On Christmas day, 1863, the distinguished American poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow sat down to write a poem. He was a 57 year old widowed father of six children. And his oldest son had been nearly paralyzed from a wound suffered in the Civil War.

On that Christmas day he heard the Christmas bells and the singing of peace on earth. But, he also knew full well the world of injustice and violence that seemed to mock the message of Christmas.

He wrote,  
*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!"*

But, then he wrote,

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:  
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;  
The Wrong shall fail,  
the Right prevail,  
With peace on earth, good-will to men."*

This struggle to have hope in the midst of pain and despair is present not only in Wadsworth's poem but also in the biblical story as well.

Peace on earth and good-will will finally be won only by the sacrifice of a cross. And this struggle for God's peace in a world of conflict continues even today.

But, as the bells of Christmas peal let us remember the deeper message. In the final act God's will ... will be done, and his peace shall reign forever and ever.

Amen.