

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 2:13-14 "God's Christmas Gifts: Peace"

"Glory to God in the highest, and *on earth peace* to men on whom his favor rests." So sang the angels. What could they have meant? What is this peace and where is it found? We would all like to know!

1) *Peace That Passes Understanding*

When we think of peace, we most often think of our inner peace and quiet – things our therapeutic and individualistic culture encourages us to seek! But in the Bible, peace is rarely a feeling and almost always a condition. You are at peace or you are not, no matter how you feel about it. The end of the Civil War, or WWII, were marked by definite dates of surrender, and then there was reason to celebrate because "peace had come." That is the major Biblical sense of "peace."

But biblically, peace is more than the end of war or hostilities. It is a condition that Paul says "passes understanding;" it is a gift that Jesus says "he gives, but not as the world gives." The Hebrew word for peace is *shalom* – a state of living in harmony with God, with the world, and with other people; which also leads to that inner peace and security we long for. In the rural cultures of the Old Testament, *shalom* meant long life, a fertile wife and many children; large flocks, good crops, fruitful orchards; just and harmonious relations with other people... You could call it "being blessed;" it is such a state of

harmony with God and everyone else that it is almost equivalent to *salvation* – "the restoration of all things to the condition God intended."

So has anyone ever experienced true *shalom*? It's hard to believe they have. But the angels who sang over a field at Christmas announced that the glory of God was now come to earth, and the result would be "*peace on earth to men on whom his favor rests.*" So how do you gain God's favor and be blessed with peace?

2) *He Is Our Peace*

Jesus, the long-for "shepherd of Israel," would himself "*be our peace*" said the prophet Micah. Isaiah called him "*the Prince of Peace.*" Jesus himself began his adult ministry saying that his coming marked "*the year of the Lord's favor.*" So from the prophets of the Exile onwards, the word to God's people is "*Comfort ye... speak tenderly to Jerusalem; tell her 'your warfare is over... your sin has been paid for.'*" The baby born in Bethlehem would bring reconciliation of God and his people.

How could he do that? By standing in the place of God's wayward people and bearing in himself the penalty of their sin; by suffering in ways that remain, to this day, beyond our understanding. When the biblical writers try to find words for it, they use ideas like sacrifice, atonement,

substitution; and say that Jesus' death somehow satisfied justice and brought about reconciliation. Isaiah put it simply: *"the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."*

So the New Testament promise is that those who willingly make him their peace, who accept that he bridges the chasm between us and God, who put their faith in the fact that he has paid the price, he has ransomed us; people who do that find themselves in a new condition that Paul calls *"peace with God."* That many people then and now reject such an idea as nonsense, or as an insult to them, is clear. Today there are people making money from writing books that describe how they dislike the God of the Bible.

But there are also millions - no, billions of people - who have discovered that the new state of grace that Jesus offers us is indeed a place where we sense that we are at peace with God. And there is no better time than Christmas to embrace by faith the Prince of Peace, who by his sacrifice and his victory has opened the gates for us to enter his Father's kingdom. So we learn that the God who seemed remote and angry can be a close and loving Father, and that we are welcome in his presence. We can speak to him in prayer, and raise our voices to him in praise and worship, and know that he is good and can be trusted.

3) *Peace That Guards The Heart*

But of course there is a danger that we can make this new condition, this new relationship, *too personal*; that we take from it "peace within" and are happy with that. But Jesus tells us that "peace on earth" is not "all about us" and our feelings - that there is work to do to complete God's world restoration project!

So Jesus says *"blessed are the peace-makers."* When we reach a place of peace with God, he then sends us out to make peace with and among other people. And hard as it is to accept that we need reconciling to God, it's perhaps even harder to take on the task of being a peace-maker! Too much about the age and culture we live in militates against peace between people.

Even within our families, it's hard to make peace! Fallen people living together inevitably fall out over all kinds of things, some of them alarmingly trivial! Who left the top off the tooth-paste? Why is the TV so loud when I am trying to sleep? Is it beyond you to put your dirty dishes in the dishwasher? Why should I always be the one to take out the garbage? And if you are at an age where you are trying to do your best for both your aging parents and your slow-to-grow-up children, the sources of tension are too many to count!

Can we who by faith are reconciled to God, find it in ourselves - by his grace and by the work of his Spirit - to be reconciled even to the people we love and live with? Is our calling now to promote *shalom* in our household? God has made us and called us to help everyone flourish, and to assist people to live in harmony. We could all do well to start a Christmas project called *"shalom at home!"*

That would mean - at least - not whining; looking out for other people's needs and feelings and not just our own; learning the virtue of forgiveness (which as we have discussed before, does not mean forgetting wrongs, or pretending they don't hurt, but rather deciding that they will not stand in the way of a better future relationship).

What about peace in our communities, or in our nation? How could we contribute to peace between whites and Hispanics in

Suffolk County? How could we promote genuine bi-partisan government work for the common good, rather than political posturing and power-plays? Will we ever have an election, at any level, whose outcome is not determined by negative campaigning, accusations, slurs? What about the next round of School Board elections? Could we make them civil, and encourage real discussions of the difficult fiscal and educational problems that face our community? Or will once again the loudest and most divisive voices win?

Could we ensure that we send to Albany people who are honest, and work for us and not for themselves? Can we unite our nation to deal honestly with the major problems we still face, and not reduce every debate to sloganeering and farce? How shall we deal, as a nation, with the fact that over 1/2 a million of our young men and women in uniform have already served in Iraq or Afghanistan, some of them repeatedly, and that they and their families have sacrificed deeply, while the rest of us have enjoyed our tax cuts and tried to keep shopping?

Is there a way to bring peace to our young people, so they are less likely to ruin their lives before they're 25? Can we adjust our ideas of "success" so that our kids are not driven to either excel or drop out? What would it mean to be a peace-maker in our school systems? In our work-places? In our homes?

The image the prophets paint of the New Covenant era that Messiah will bring in has "swords beaten into plowshares," "the lion lying down with the lamb," "the desert flowering." It is a peaceable kingdom, a place and time of *shalom*, where people and all created things flourish and live in harmony. Can we not create even a tiny back yard that looks like that? A home where people do not put each other down, or nag,

but are considerate and cooperative? A community that rejoices in how richly it is blessed, and therefore happily entrusts its government to leaders with integrity?

What can you and I do this December to be peace-makers? Determine to keep the peace in our homes as everyone gathers for Christmas? Offer our time to a lonely neighbor? Give a gift to a homeless child? Could we pray and worship more, and shop and decorate less, and become examples of serenity and peace and harmonious living? Could we, by the grace of God, become people that everyone is glad to be around, and not people everyone flees from? Could we create a small version of "the peaceable kingdom" around us?

Because what the angels implicitly say is "*let there be peace on earth,*" and Jesus says "blessed are the peace-makers." People who know they are at peace with God ought surely to show that in their human relationships. If we truly put our faith in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we discover that "*the peace of God guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,*" and that shows in the way we treat other people...

Let us pray.