

“Peace Amidst Conflict”

Luke 2:24

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December 24, 2015 – 11:00 p.m. Christmas Eve sermon

Luke 2 gives us one of those definitive texts to use on a Christmas Eve worship service. Luke 2:1–14 says [1] *In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. [2] This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. [3] And all went to be registered, each to his own town. [4] And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, [5] to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. [6] And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. [7] And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

[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!”*

Peace on earth, what a great concept, at least my version of it is. When I hear the phrase ‘peace on earth’ I immediately think to peace with all men. I think of turning on the TV and not having to listen to a terrorist attack or not reading about racism or hatred between countries in the newspaper. I think of not hearing any rumor or report of ISIS or any hate group. I think even in a more simplistic way there would be peace in relationships among men and women. At Christmas I have this expectation that everyone is going to be a whole lot nicer and that we’re going to drive down hwy 280 to shop and that person will let me in the next lane or let me have that better parking place. I just have this concept that there will be some level of my definition of peace on earth.

Yet that is not at all what the Lord communicates to us when He says that peace comes to earth. He doesn’t say in any way that this will be a much better, nicer place for you to live. Yet He does say there will be peace amidst conflict for there will always be conflict until Christ returns. So what He promises to us is not to remove the conflict but He promises to bring peace amidst the conflict.

Christmas Eve a little over 100 years ago, the world was clearly in conflict. World War I was raging on and in the midst of the fierce, bloody and frozen battles that were taking place, a pretty interesting and strange thing took place. Several participants of this event would later write about it in their letters home. They would say that about midnight a German soldier from their own trenches began to sing Christmas carols across the no man’s land and the French and the British heard the singing in German of these familiar carols. They didn’t recognize the words but recognized the tunes so they began to sing Christmas carols of their own back to the Germans. They were proclamations of the birth and coming of Christ.

One private would recall it in his letter back home this way; first the Germans would sing one of their carols and then we would sing one of ours until we started up the carol O Come All Ye Faithful. The Germans immediately joined in singing the same carol in the Latin words and I thought this was a most extraordinary thing. Here are two nations both singing the same carol in the middle of the war. The next day, Christmas Day, the two sides participated in what was referred to as an unofficial truce. It was a truce announced by all the Generals over these particular branches of service. They put down their weapons, left their trenches and met in this no man's land and interacted over what appeared to be some peace amidst the conflict regardless of the language barriers.

One soldier wrote; Friday (Christmas Day). We are having the most extraordinary Christmas Day imaginable. A sort of unarranged and quite unauthorized but perfectly understood and scrupulously observed truce exists between us and our friends in front. The funny thing is it only seems to exist in this part of the battle line – on our right and left we can all hear them firing away as cheerfully as ever. The thing started last night – a bitter cold night, with white frost – soon after dusk when the Germans started shouting 'Merry Christmas, Englishmen' to us. Of course our fellows shouted back and presently large numbers of both sides had left their trenches, unarmed, and met in the debatable, shot-riddled, no man's land between the lines. Here the agreement – all on their own – came to be made that we should not fire at each other until after midnight tonight. The men were all fraternizing in the middle (we naturally did not allow them too close to our line) and swapped cigarettes and lies in the utmost good fellowship. Not a shot was fired all night.

Five days later the man who wrote that was killed by one of those who stood on the other side, one who he was in combat with. They had peace amidst the conflict. It wasn't the kind of peace on earth that maybe you or I would desire but peace amidst the conflict. There are similar stories of wartime events at Christmas that occurred in the Civil War. Even though Congress didn't declare Christmas to be a holiday until 1870 it was already celebrated by both the Union and Confederate soldiers in their own unique ways.

One such example was reported to occur on Christmas in 1862 where Confederate and Union soldiers sang Christmas carols back and forth to each that was similar to what would take place years later in World War I. They sang carols such as Deck the Halls, O Come All Ye Faithful and Hark the Herald Angels Sing. These would have been common carols that would have been sung back then. Then after Christmas they would reengage in a fiercely bloody battle but they had peace amidst the conflict.

To a much, much smaller extent there is a peace amidst the conflict at Christmas when you gather together with extended family. Any time you add the word extended to family you heighten the possibility of conflict. About half of you just looked down the pew at someone when I said that. I'm not sure who you are referring to but before you think the other part of the extended family has the conflict it may be you. They may be very well thinking that it's you and not them. That is what happens in my household when we get the extended families together and all of sudden there are a wide range of views on things like politics, religion and even football. Yet football is the one we try to leave alone or it won't be a happy Christmas for anyone. There is this expectation though that there would be peace among the conflict. We are very careful in the Stallings family of who sits next to who at dinner and we separate those who have very diverse opinions about certain things. We want to maintain the peace as my dad used to say and then he would always add, at least at Christmas.

Here in Luke 2 we find a declaration of peace amidst conflict. It's not world peace the way we might think of it but peace amidst conflict. The angels appear to the shepherds and they are proclaiming to them the Good News that Christ is born. Christ the Lord, the Messiah has come. They proclaim "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased." If this declaration of peace is amidst conflict then why do they say it's Good News for all men and where is the conflict?

The conflict is not a war or a battle as perhaps the way we would think of war or battle but the conflict in this statement appears in the qualifier for the peace. Often times we love to put a period at the end of the phrase 'peace on earth' but it says 'peace on earth among those with whom He is pleased.' It's conflict for only some portion of the world to experience that peace. It's a conflict for the rest of the world not to experience that peace of Christ so the angels themselves declare to us this conflict that exists.

The New International Version of the Bible says 'to those on whom His favor or grace rests' where the grace of God actually rests upon Him. This conflict is certainly greater than any family or extended family conflict. It is even greater than a war or a battle. This is an eternal conflict that is being referenced. This is a conflict of sin. This is the conflict that good has with evil and that man has with God for God created man without conflict. There was no conflict in the Garden prior to the Fall and then man ushered in conflict that would continue until Christ returns.

We live in that context. It's hard for me to think about but the Scripture is very clear to us that as a part of this conflict we have with our sin we become enemies of God. I do not like to think of myself as an enemy of God. I like to think of myself as one that would love God and choose God but the reality is that I would not. The reality is that any inclination that I have towards God is because of the Holy Spirit that grants me that, that draws me unto Him and opens my eyes, my heart and my life unto Him. Even while we were enemies of God, God chose to rest His favor upon us. He chose by grace to be pleased with us.

Romans 5:10 says *[10] For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.* The angels are declaring that Christ has come bringing peace on those whom God's favor, His grace rests. For those who reject Christ the conflict is unresolved and remains unresolved for all of eternity. The Good News the angels proclaim is that Christ has come and that only in Christ can we find His favor and receive that grace that He extends to us.

I love how Paul explains this in his letter to the church at Ephesus. Ephesians 2:13–16 says *[13] But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. [14] For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility [15] by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, [16] and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.*

Paul goes on to write in Colossians 1:15–20, *[15] He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. [16] For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. [17] And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. [18] And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. [19] For in him all the fullness of God was*

*pleased to dwell, [20] and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, **making peace by the blood of his cross.***

Praise the Lord that the Lord resolved for us that conflict that existed between us and Him. We are no longer enemies. We're not just allies but now children of God, in Christ, called and drawn to be His children and for Him to be our Lord. Yet the reality is that the conflict does not cease to exist for even as believers, as children of God we continue in the sinful flesh. Even as children of God we continue to live as long as the Lord so wills, in this broken and sinful world and therefore there is conflict. There is conflict internally with us as we wrestle with our sin. There is conflict externally all around us as we deal with the repercussions of other people's sin, as we deal with the will of God being played out in a world full of sin, waiting for Christ to return and resolve all of the conflict.

As Christ gathered His disciples together for the Passover meal He explained to them this peace amidst conflict. For even while they ate this celebratory Passover meal which He eagerly desired to eat with them, the plot to have Him killed was well under way. As a matter of fact His betrayer sat at the Table with them. Jesus was trying to explain to them the Peace that was to come but it was peace amidst the conflict that raged on. The cross that He goes to is the epitome of peace amidst conflict. At that cross is there a better picture of the conflict between good and evil being resolved? From that cross victory over sin is extended and what gets extended to us is peace for He was making peace by His blood on the cross. So when Christ comes and is explaining to the disciples how this Passover meal is to be fulfilled and draws them to the Lord's Table, He does this in remembrance of Him and to portray to them the true meaning of His body and blood. It is the true meaning of what it means to have peace on earth, peace amidst conflict.

I would love to be able to say to you that if we celebrate Christmas the right way, do Communion the right way and we say the right words today the right way, then there will be peace on earth. Actually God is sovereignly in control of peace on earth and He promised us that in this world there would be tribulation. We are not to fear because God has overcome the world but He did promise us tribulation. So it is not that we come this Christmas Eve night to celebrate and even partake of Communion so that we will leave and have this peace that we would define before God, but no, for what God promises to us is relational peace with Him. Our sins are being paid for and we are declared righteous because Christ has become sin for us and He has paid that sacrifice.

That is what this Communion Table declares to us and reminds us of and that's why He said 'do this in remembrance of Me.' It is so that we would constantly be reminded of the body and blood of Christ given up for us and this was necessary for the forgiveness of our sins. So we come to His Table knowing that we're not perfect people and desiring to have Communion with Him. We come to this Table desiring to confess our sins before Him and even as we partake of the bread (body) and the cup (blood) we celebrate forgiveness. We celebrate the peace that we have with God in Christ for He has come to give us peace with God in the midst of the conflict. So we come in confidence because we are confident in our Source of peace. We come humbled in a celebratory fashion for we celebrate the birth of Christ which was necessary in order for us to experience the death of Christ which was necessary for us to celebrate the resurrection of Christ, completely defeating our sins that we might have a relationship with Him.

Lastly, we come seeking His return. I would pray today that as you come before our Heavenly Father that you come to the Table to celebrate Jesus Christ and what He has done for us, the salvation that He extends to us. I pray that you would come seeking His return and as we

celebrate His birth today, we celebrate His birth tomorrow and that we would all pray 'come quickly Lord Jesus.' Let's pray.

Prayer:

Most graciously Heavenly Father how we thank You so much that You extend to us peace amidst conflict. Lord, we trust Your sovereign will in our lives and in this world. Lord, we are so grateful for the sending of Your Son that He came to save His people from their sins. He comes offering salvation to us and we thank You for Your Holy Spirit that guides and directs us and gives us insight and understand of and into the Messiah. Lord, I pray that You would open all hearts and minds unto You. If there is anyone reading this that does not know You as their personal Savior, I pray that they would acknowledge and confess their sins to You right now and claim the forgiveness that You extend to us through Jesus Christ our Lord. Lord, I pray that You would guide us to this Table that we would celebrate the birth, death, resurrection and the Second Advent, the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, for then we will experience perfect peace with You for all eternity. I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.