

“Peace on Earth”
Christmas Eve
December 24, 2016
Text: Luke 2:1-20

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered.

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. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 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.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

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."

So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

What a story! Angels appear out of nowhere. The bright lights, bold announcements, and a baby in a manger. We hear of these things and we know it's Christmas Eve. And like old familiar friends, these words from the Gospel of Luke visit us once again:

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

Terror. The shepherds are terrified, frightened by a bright light of an angel of the Lord. We know about terror. It is part of *our* world, punctuating our current events and embedding fear in our collective conscious, and with every flash and explosion causing humanity to be torn further apart.

But this thing in the fields outside of Bethlehem, this is a different kind of terror. In fact, it's not a terror at all:

*The angel says to the shepherds, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for **all** the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."*

The Messiah; the long-awaited Savior of God's people. Finally, a messiah who would rescue the Jews from all their enemies after centuries of oppression and pain, exile and slavery. If trouble didn't come from nearby regions of hostile invaders, it was the oppressive Roman Empire keeping them in line and monitoring them by having them do such things as register. News of a triumphant savior meant their day of freedom was on its way. But then, this would be a different kind of Messiah. The angel says:

"This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." A small and humble scene, a quiet night, a loving mother, a newborn baby on a bed of hay.

And then, just as soon as the story is reduced to a quaint scene from a greeting card, the heavens break loose:

Suddenly there is with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

Countless heavenly voices praising God, and calling for peace on earth for **all** of God's favored. Over a troubled world, it's God's call for peace. Do not let this night pass without hearing it.

"Peace on earth!" the angels shout. If only that cry could be heard all around the world tonight. If only the heart of humanity could be captured with such a desire. If only all could know the Prince of Peace as prophesied by old Isaiah who said:

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.

The Prince of Peace. If only this war-torn world could hear this prophecy on this night. If they only knew what comes from this baby in the manger. How will this happen? Who will bring this message into a world with as much darkness and terror as ours?

Peace. What is this message of peace? Do you know that through faith in Jesus, we are reconciled to God. You have heard it said that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him will not die, but have

everlasting life. The sick condition of humanity has been healed, set right, and turned from the slide into darkness and death back into light and life. Any estrangement with God is over as our sins are forgiven. This is how we are now at peace with God. This is what this Savior brings, this why this Messiah comes. This is the Jesus reality. And he comes preaching about a kingdom; the kingdom of a loving God. And he gives the great commandment, which is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your mind, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and also to love your neighbor as yourself. Love for God, and love for others; the ultimate manifestation of a genuine peace; the kind of peace God is calling for.

Do not miss the call from God for peace—peace between us and God, and peace between ourselves. God makes peace with us through Jesus. But peace between ourselves, that's on us. And friends, whether we want to be or not, we are the agents of peace. Peace is manifested by those who have been drawn to a manger, who have seen the Savior of the world as a vulnerable baby; who recognize that his power has always come through vulnerability, and that indeed his victory over death happens when at his most vulnerable, he willingly surrenders his life on a cross for the sake of all others. The good news is the kingdom of heaven has been made known to us through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, the Prince of Peace. As we hear, once again, the ancient story, we are called to be agents of peace. So again, I say, it's us. We are the bringers of light.

Those who have heard the good news now carry the light of God.

Those who have seen the manger now carry the light of Jesus the Christ.

Those who have believed now carry the light of the Holy Spirit.

How much darker will the world get before we decide to let the light of God shine through us? On this night we are called to lift our light of peace into this dark and desperate world. We are called to bring this light to those we know, and to those we don't. To those we love, and to those we don't. To the ones who look like us, and to the ones who don't. To the ones who are our friends, and especially to the ones we call our enemies. It's on us, the ones who bear the very name of Christ and who follow the one called the Prince of Peace.

On our behalf may the angels ever sing,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" Amen.