

December 6, 2020
Luke 2:8-14



Today is the second week of Advent, and as we continue through the season, we arrive at the second message in the series, titled *A Light in the Darkness*. The series is based on the Advent candles and their meaning – hope, peace, love, and joy. Today’s message is *peace*.

Our Scripture text comes from Luke 2:8-14, one of the most well-known of the Christmas passages. Follow along with me, as I read that passage –

⁸ *And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.*

⁹ *An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.*

¹⁰ *But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.*

¹¹ *Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.*

¹² *This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”*

¹³ *Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,*

¹⁴ *“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”*

When we talk about *peace*, one of the first necessities is to define what we are speaking about. *Peace* is a word that covers a lot of linguistic territory and it carries a number of different meanings. What I will talk about is the idea of peace in the macro sense – the *big picture*, as we say – and in the micro sense, or the *small picture*. When I say *big picture*, what I mean is the idea of peace on a national, international, and global scale, and the peace – or lack of peace – between nations. In the *small picture* of peace I will talk about peace between individuals, and keeping or restoring peace in those relationships. But the small picture also refers to individuals as well, and a sense of peace that we each desire to have in our own lives.

Let's start from the macro – the big picture – and move to the micro as we talk about peace. As the angels said,

1. *On Earth Peace* – to the nations.

In terms of the *big picture*, our world has been terribly devoid of peace for most of human history. The story of Cain killing his brother Abel (Genesis 4:8) set a template for the violence that has plagued humanity from the beginning. That violence has continued throughout history almost unabated. In fact, according to a 2003 article in *The New York Times*, in the past 3,400 years, humanity has been entirely at peace for only 268 of those years, or just 8% of that time. And, in a staggering number, in the 20th century alone, at least 108 million people died as a result of war. 108 million people!

There are some interesting flashes of peace in that time, one of which took place in World War I, a war that killed or wounded more than 25 million people, an unbelievable number. On Christmas Eve of 1914, at 8:30 p.m., a report between British and German troops was sent to British headquarters reporting that *Germans have illuminated their trenches, are singing songs and wishing us a Happy Christmas. Compliments are being exchanged but am nevertheless taking military precautions.* The two sides began singing Christmas carols, the Germans with *Silent Night* and the British responded with *The First Noel*. A few scouts met, cautiously, in the no-man's land between the

trenches, and the two sides agreed they would not fire at one another. Small Christmas trees had been placed along some of the trenches, and slowly and cautiously, soldiers from both sides began to venture towards one another. As one British soldier later told his parents, *literally hundreds of each side were out in no man's land shaking hands*. Eventually, a soccer ball was brought out and soldiers from the two sides began to play soccer. But the reality of war soon returned and would last for just over four more years. Many of the men who were a part of that Christmas miracle would not return home. Peace, miraculous that day, would remain sadly and tragically elusive.

One of humanity's great absurdities is the idea that war, violence, and domination can bring about peace. The Romans believed it could, and they created the Pax Romana – the Roman Peace. The Pax Romana was a peace that came about through an iron-fisted rule that spawned immense suffering, difficulty, and bitterness. While it might have ended war, to an extent, the Pax Romana did not mean the end of violence. To keep the peace, the Romans employed a brutal enforcement that used a good deal of violence. Violence can bring order, to some extent, but it does not bring peace. Peace that is enforced with violence only creates bitterness, hatred, and suffering. Evidently, the Romans did not see the irony of enforcing peace through the use of violence. But it's not just the Romans who failed to see that irony; it's been almost every nation in the history of humanity as well. How many centuries has the Middle East, for instance, been a tinderbox of violence, bitterness, and hatred? One of the reasons why it has been such a tinderbox is that so many military powers, beginning thousands of years ago, believed they could impose peace through violence. How well has that worked out? Not very well at all. Centuries before the time of Jesus there was violence in that land, and one kingdom and power after another conquered the land, and in the process, only increased the bitterness, the hatred, and the injustice. In the time of Jesus, it was the turn of the Romans to dominate, and they dominated brutally.

The Hebrew word for peace is *shalom*. I have to admit that I was not a Hebrew scholar, at all, but I do know that *shalom* is a very interesting

word, and it is one that doesn't really have an equivalent in the English language. We have the word *peace*, of course, but *shalom* is far more comprehensive in its meaning. For one, it is more than just a cessation of violence and hostilities. The peace described by *shalom* means *wholeness, tranquility, completeness*. It means to wish for the best for others. That is a far more inclusive definition than one that simply means people are not trying to kill one another.

Our nation is currently engaged in the longest war in American history, in Afghanistan, outlasting the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, and the Korean War *combined*. If U.S. soldiers continue to deploy to Afghanistan, they will soon be soldiers that were not born when that war started. I want to be very clear that I am grateful to the members of our military, but we all would wish that the members of our military could come home and stay home. Who wants their loved one to be placed in danger?

Isaiah 2:4 famously says *He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore*. We still have the same hope as Isaiah, all these centuries later, and peace seems just as elusive. God's desire is for peace. We follow Jesus, the Prince of Peace. What a heartbreak it must be for God to see his creation fighting and killing one another.

2. *On Earth Peace* – to the people.

If Cain could become so angry at his brother Abel that he killed him, how could we ever expect nations to find peace? It is on the small-scale, among people, among neighbors, among coworkers, in a community, that peace must begin. Conquering kingdoms and military powers have taught us that peace is not a top-down endeavor; peace comes from the bottom up.

I have spoken before about the great amount of diversity among the disciples, even political diversity. One disciple – Matthew – worked for the Roman government, while another – Simon – was a Zealot, a

political group so opposed to the Roman government that they advocated violent means if and when necessary in order to accomplish their goal of driving the Romans out of their land. Jesus put together that volatile, combustible mixture in his 12 disciples. I think it was very deliberate and it was meant to teach us something important not only about diversity, but especially about getting along with those who are different from ourselves.

I saw an article recently in a publication that I subscribed to – yes, that is past tense; I did subscribe – in which a reader asked the staff “ethicist” the question of whether or not they should associate with friends and family who were on the opposite side politically. I canceled my subscription soon after, and that was one of the reasons. Is that what some people think these days? That we should not associate with people who think or believe differently from ourselves? I fear that it is. We are segregating more and more into camps of people according to beliefs, politics, and other orthodoxies, with the intent of removing those who disagree from our circles of associations. If we can’t get along in small groups, if we cannot learn to deal civilly with one another on the small scale, what hope do we have for the larger world?

Jesus took his disciples into Samaria – a region that many avoided because of the enmity against the Samaritan people – and he did so, I believe, to bring them face to face with the people they had been taught to despise. He told a parable about a good Samaritan. When he healed ten lepers only one of the lepers returned to thank him, and that one was a Samaritan. Jesus knew that it is harder to dislike or to despise someone once you get to know them, but how can we do that if we continue to segregate in our little groups? I just cannot help but think, and I cannot help but believe, that all our separating is both bad for humanity and in absolute opposition to the spirit of Jesus. Jesus did not allow the disapproval of others to keep him from associating with the “tax collectors and sinners,” but he also, we should remember, associated with the Pharisees and other religious leaders who would have been disliked by the tax collectors and sinners. In this respect,

Jesus was an equal opportunity offender. But all he wanted was to bring peace between people.

3. *On Earth Peace* – to each person.

We not only struggle to bring peace to the nations and to small groups of people; we also struggle to bring peace to ourselves. Don't raise your hand – although there are only a few people here who could – but could you use some peace in your life? Could you use some peace in your mind? Could you use some peace in your heart? Would you like to bring an end to the inner turmoil that keeps you up at night, that is turning your hair grey, that has your stomach upset, and that makes you so sad that sometimes you cannot hold back the tears, and when someone asks you what is wrong, you say, *oh, nothing*.

I know what it is to worry, to be upset, and to long for inner peace. Listen, if worry and upset were Olympic competitions, I would be a gold medal winner. Jesus said, *peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid*. Hmmm. I would be happy for success in just one of those areas that Jesus mentions – that my heart would not be troubled or I would not be afraid. That's a lethal combination, and I think most of us have that combination. And that combination really is lethal to our hearts, and our minds, and our spirits. And to make matters worse, there is this terrible, awful pandemic that is making everything worse, especially our lack of peace.

I spend a lot of time listening to people pour out their hearts in a normal year, even in a good year. You know what this year has been like? It's been a lot of listening. A lot. And a lot of trying to help people feel hopeful, and a lot of trying to help people feel a measure of peace. It has been listening to people try to speak through their tears and their heartbreaks. At those times, I wonder, *what do I say, when I feel the same? How do I tell someone how to find peace when it is so lacking in my own life?* Well, I don't have the answer, but I know who does!

The angels proclaimed to the shepherds, *on earth peace*. I sure like the sound of that, don't you? It's a proclamation of a promise. It's not merely a hope and it is certainly more than a dream; it is a promise! On earth, peace! Peace to you, my friends, my church, my brothers and my sisters. Peace to you, from the Prince of Peace, Jesus!