

PEACE ON EARTH

CHRISTMAS MESSAGE



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Luke 2
Christmas Message
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Luke 2

In no mood to celebrate

Luke writes near the beginning of his gospel that a multitude of angels, in the presence of some shepherds, heralded the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem:

Luke 2:14:

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

One could be forgiven for wondering whether the angels, if you happen to believe in angels, were misinformed, for war has continued unabated on earth from the day Jesus was born until this day. If the birth of Jesus signaled peace on earth, was it sending the wrong signal?

Whenever you start reading a book, you may not understand what the author is saying at the beginning. Indeed, instead of assuming you know what he or she means, you should keep reading. What did the angels mean? Let’s keep reading in the gospel of Luke.

Jesus brings division

After he was fully grown, Jesus said, “Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth?” (Luke 12:51) What’s the answer? Yes, we assume. The angels said so way back in Luke 2. What’s Jesus’ answer?

Luke 12:51-53:

“No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

What?

We’d better keep reading.

When Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, the city of kings, his disciples were over the moon, hoping that he would be enthroned as king of Israel, shouting, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!” They also echoed the angels’ words to the shepherds, shouting, “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” (Luke 19:38) Hopes were high.

Jesus, however, was in no mood to celebrate. In fact, Luke reports that as Jerusalem came into view, Jesus wept over it, saying:

Luke 19:41-44:

“Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. 43 For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side 44 and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation.”

If Jesus comes to bring peace on earth, he accuses Jerusalem first of being ignorant of “the things that make for peace” and second of not recognizing the time of its “visitation”—that is, his coming to it. The people of Jerusalem—indeed, the people of Israel at the time—did not receive Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Jesus therefore expects not peace but war, predicting that Jerusalem’s enemies will destroy the city.

A violent death

And what would become of Jesus? His disciples had shouted, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!” A few days later, Jerusalem repeatedly shouted, “Crucify, crucify him!” (Luke 23:21) Jesus, whose birth called for peace on earth, met with a violent death.

And Jerusalem? Jesus was right. A few decades later, his countrymen, who didn't recognize the time of their visitation, who didn't receive Jesus, took up arms against the Romans, who put down the rebellion in brutal fashion, laying waste to Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

Scholar N.T. Wright explains:

“Jesus’ contemporaries for the most part were not wanting peace They wanted an all-out war that would bring God’s justice swiftly to their aid and get rid of their enemies once and for all Rome’s punishment for rebel subjects would be the direct result of God’s people turning away from God’s way of peace.”¹

To this day, many people simply don't want peace—not to mention the Prince of Peace.

Turn back the pages

Peace on earth? Sometimes, when you're reading a book and you come to some parts that you don't understand, you turn back the pages to see if there's something you missed. What did the angels say again? “Glory to God in the highest, / and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

Oh, peace on earth is not necessarily for everyone; it is for those with whom God is pleased. With whom is God pleased?

When Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit descended on him, and a voice—God's voice—came from heaven speaking, “You are beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22). God is pleased with Jesus, his Son.

Is there anyone else he's pleased with? Jesus told his disciples, “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom (Luke 12:32). If it is God's “good pleasure” to give Jesus' followers the kingdom of God, then he is pleased with them. God is pleased with those who receive his Son.

Okay, a few things are falling into place now.

Those who receive Jesus

Simeon was an old man, and the Holy Spirit told him that he would not die until he saw the Messiah—that is, the king of Israel, destined to be Lord of the world. Indeed, he saw Jesus when he was a child, took him into his arms and prayed, “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace” (Luke 2:29).

When Jesus told a sinner that her sins were forgiven, he also told her, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (Luke 7:50).

After healing a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years, Jesus told her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace” (Luke 8:48).

Jesus, though he met with a violent death, didn't stay dead. God raised him from the dead. Then he appeared to his disciples and said to them, “Peace to you!” (Luke 24:36)

In the gospel of Luke, God is pleased with those who receive his Son, and those who receive his Son have peace. What about those who don't receive Jesus?

Jesus sent out seventy of his followers and instructed them: “Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace be to this house!’ And if a son of peace is there, your peace will rest upon him. But if not, it will return to you” (Luke 10:5-6). In other words, those who don't receive Jesus, as indicated by their refusal to receive his disciples, don't have peace.

What then are we to make of peace on earth? The gospel of Luke is a book, yes, but it's a book within a book. As we continue in the New Testament, what do we read?

Peace with God

“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 5:1).

First, peace on earth means peace with God for those who have been justified by faith—that is, those who have received Jesus. Peace is not only absence of hostilities but also human wholeness—in this case, wholeness in relationship with God.

A fable is told of a Jewish boy named Mordecai. His parents taught him the importance of the word of God and sent him to the synagogue. But something within the boy resisted. Instead of going to the synagogue, he played in the woods, climbed on the trees, and swam in the lake. His parents called in the experts to try to change him, but Mordecai could not be changed. His parents grieved.

Then one day, the Great Rabbi visited the village. Mordecai's parents took him to the rabbi. Mordecai stood

in the hallway, and the Great Rabbi stood in his parlor. He beckoned, “Boy, come here.” Trembling, Mordecai came forward. And then the Great Rabbi picked him up and held him silently against his heart.

The next day Mordecai went to the synagogue to learn the word of God. And when he was done, he played in the woods. The word of God became one with Mordecai. When he went to the synagogue, he learned the word of God. When he went to the woods, he learned the word of God.

Mordecai grew up to become a great man. People who were without anyone came to him and found communion. People with no exits came to him and found a way out. People who were seized with panic came to him and found peace. And when they came to him, he told them, “I first learned the word of God when the Great Rabbi held me silently against his heart.”²

Think of Jesus as the Great Rabbi. “He will tend his flock like a shepherd; / he will gather the lambs in his arms; / he will carry them in his bosom, / and gently lead those that are with young” (Isaiah 40:11). What’s troubling you today? Let the Great Rabbi hold you silently against his heart. You will find peace with God.

First, those of us who receive Jesus find peace with God, wholeness in relationship with him, especially as we approach Jesus. Second, we find peace with others.

Peace with others

“For he himself [Christ] is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 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, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility” (Ephesians 2:14-16).

Second, peace on earth means peace with others, beginning in the first century with the bringing together of Jews and Gentiles. Again, peace is not simply absence of hostilities; it is also human wholeness—in this case, human wholeness in relationships with others.

Writer Anne Lamott passes on the story of a seven-year-old girl who got lost:

The little girl ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn’t find a single landmark. She was very frightened. Finally a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of

this car, and they drove around until she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, “You could let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here.”

“And that,” Lamott writes, “is why I have stayed so close to mine—because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my church, and hear their tawny voices, I can always find my way home.”³

The church, of course, is not a building; it’s the people. The sign outside our building reads, “Peninsula Bible Church meets here.” Well, that isn’t quite true these days, is it? Because of the pandemic, Peninsula Bible Church doesn’t meet in the building right now—and it’s a really beautiful building after our remodel. The church meets in other ways, including via live stream, but it doesn’t meet in the building. It is therefore especially important these days to think of the church as the people, not the building.

Reveling in the chaos

As a pastor, I realized long ago that I can’t connect deeply with everyone, not least because I’m only one person. However, I’ve also realized that I can provide a context for people to connect with each other.

Before the pandemic, our Connect Group met in our home, and we plan do so again when the pandemic ends. (We’re now meeting over Zoom.) When we meet in person, it’s a bit chaotic, because when everyone is present, we have more than thirty people, and about half of them are kids. We always share a meal together, and gathering everyone for the meal is a bit of a task.

One of the last times we met before the pandemic, after we prayed for the meal, I stood in the kitchen took in the scene and reveled in the life, chaotic as it was. One of the brothers caught me doing so and said, “You must be really enjoying this.” He was right. People were connecting, and the stage was set for them to connect over a meal.

First, those of us who receive Jesus find peace with God. Second, we find peace with others, wholeness in relationship with others, especially as we connect with one another. Finally, do we find peace with everyone?

Peace with everyone?

“If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all (Romans 12:18).

Third, peace on earth doesn't necessarily mean peace with everyone. Living peaceably with everyone is not always possible. Despite our best efforts, others may not want to live peaceably with us, or they may lay down unacceptable conditions.

Remember, Jesus came not only to bring peace on earth, he also came to bring division, even pitting family members against each other. He doesn't enjoy bringing division; he just knows division will happen as people receive him and are then ostracized by others, even family members. I've met many people, not so much in this country as in other countries, who have been disowned by their families after they embraced Christ.

Nevertheless, we should endeavor to live peaceably with all, especially by refusing to return evil for evil and even by blessing those who persecute us (Romans 12:14, 17).

In their book *Practical Wisdom*, psychologist Barry Schwartz and political scientist Kenneth Sharpe tell the story of a hospital janitor named Luke. In the hospital where Luke worked, there was a young man who'd gotten into a fight and had been in a coma for six months. Every day, his father sat by his side in silent vigil.

One day, Luke came in and cleaned the young man's room. His father wasn't there; he was out getting a smoke. Later that day, Luke ran into the father in the hallway. The father snapped at Luke and accused him of not cleaning his son's room.

A normal response would be to snap back, "I did clean your son's room. It was just that you were out smoking." A more unusual response would be to see your job as serving patients and their families—to meet their needs at a time of crisis. Such a response says, "This man needs comfort. Clean the room again."

That's what Luke did. He told an interviewer later, "I cleaned it so that he could see me cleaning it . . . I can understand how he could be. It was like six months that his son was there. He'd been a little frustrated, and I cleaned it again. But I wasn't angry with him. I guess I could understand."⁴

If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all—especially by refusing to return evil for evil and by blessing those who persecute you.

A new heaven and a new earth

Finally, let's return, once again, to the angels who heralded Jesus' birth. What did they say again? "Glory to God in the highest, / and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

The birth of Jesus affects both heaven ("Glory to God in the highest) and earth ("on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased"). He is from heaven, but he is born on earth. In the end, Jesus will bring heaven and earth together (Ephesians 1:9-10). There will be "a new heaven and a new earth"—and a new Jerusalem, which will come down from heaven, never to be destroyed (Revelation 21:1-2).

The new creation will be populated by those who have received Jesus (Revelation 21:7). They will live in perfect peace with God and with everyone. Indeed, there will be peace on earth for everyone who lives on earth—forever!

If you have not yet received Jesus, please do so. If you do, you will have peace with God and peace with your new family, your brothers and sisters in Christ—in advance of the day when everyone who has received Jesus will enjoy perfect peace on earth forever.

Let the Great Rabbi hold you silently against his heart.

Thanks for reading this. I pray that you can find your way home from here.

Endnotes

- 1 Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 121-22.
- 2 John Shea, *Starlight* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 115-117. The story, reworked by Shea, was originally told by Reuben Gold. It appears in the book *Abba's Child* by Brennan Manning.
- 3 Ann Lamott, *Traveling Mercies* (New York: Pantheon Books), 55. *Closer to the Heart of God* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 115.
- 4 David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* (New York: Random House, 2019), xiv, xv.