

"The Song of the Angels"
Sermon in the Series on Songs of Promise
Christmas Eve 2015
Dr. Peter B. Barnes
December 24, 2015
(Lk. 2:8-20)

Introduction.

I was born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia, and I grew up during the cold war and the Cuban Missile Crisis of the early 1960s. I remember doing "Duck and Cover" bomb drills in elementary school. Whenever the teacher yelled "Drop!" we were supposed to hide under our desks, as if that was going to protect us from a nuclear blast. My father also built a makeshift bomb shelter in our basement next to the laundry room, and we stocked it with water and canned goods in the event of a nuclear attack. Other than Miami, Atlanta was the closest major city to Cuba, and we were certain we would be one of the first targets. It was an anxious time for a kid growing up in the 1950s and 60s.

Then we were all so hopeful when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. It brought an end to the cold war which was followed by the breakup of the Soviet Union. We thought that peace might come to our world. Little did we know that just 12 years later a more dangerous and deadly threat would arise in radical Islamic extremism. 9/11 changed our world forever. And the rise of al Qaeda, Isis, and BocoHaram have created a climate of global terror that is greater than anything we've experienced since Hitler's Germany.

And then there is the social unrest in our own country. Just say the names of cities like Jefferson, Baltimore, or Chicago, and images of racial division flash in our mind's eye. Add to that the senseless violence of mass shootings in recent years, or the woman who intentionally drove her car down the sidewalks of Las Vegas just a few days ago and mowed down pedestrians, and it's easy to come away with a feeling of apprehension and fear. Every time you turn on the news, it seems there is another story of division, hatred, terror, and chaos.

I don't think there has ever been a time in my life when there has been more conflict and less peace in the world than what we're experiencing right now. Peace is hard to find this Christmas. And yet, as we have seen in our passage tonight, peace was one of the specific things the angels proclaimed in their Song of Promise that would come with the birth of Jesus. This evening as we celebrate Christmas Eve together, I want to talk about finding peace at Christmas.

I. The Announcement of Peace.

The famous story of Jesus' birth in Luke begins, "*In the days of Caesar Augustus...*" What exactly were those days like? History tells us that they were actually days of some of the most marvelous peace the ancient world had ever known.

Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 B.C., and following his tragic death, the Roman Empire fell apart for about 15-20 years. Civil war raged in Rome. Farms were neglected, towns were sacked and ravaged, and wealth was carried off by armed bandits. The administration of the government had completely fallen apart, and highwaymen roamed about, kidnapping travelers, and selling them off as slaves. Trade diminished, investment stood still, interest rates soared, and property values fell. When Julius died, peace took a vacation from the earth.

But then a man named Gaius Octavius came to power. It didn't come easily or very quickly, but eventually the Roman Senate conferred upon Octavius the title not only of Caesar but also of Savior and even God. And they called him Caesar Augustus, the ultimate ruler in the world. The Senate ordered the building of an altar with this bold statement – *Pax Augustus!* The Peace of Caesar is declared! His birthday became a national holiday. Every city built a shrine in his honor and lifted a banner to his name – “Savior of the World.”

So when Luke wrote that in the days of Caesar Augustus Jesus was born, the world was already at peace. How audacious it was for an angel to say that some other God was sending His Son into the world of Caesar Augustus, and that this baby was the One who was Christ the Lord and would bring Peace on Earth! Who are you kidding?

But then you've read about what happened to Rome. You know that the *Pax Romana* didn't last. The Empire collapsed from the inside out, and Caesar Augustus couldn't sustain peace. That first Christmas night the angels proclaimed a deeper, more lasting peace than the *Pax Romana* could ever achieve. The angels announced a peace *with* God which would also lead to the peace *of* God.

II. The Peace on Earth Christ Offers.

You and I need peace in the world today! Peace in our homes, peace between races, peace among the Republicans and Democrats, (among the Republicans and the Republicans!), and peace Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. But we'll never find lasting peace in any of these spheres of life until we experience the peace that only Christ can bring. All of our human efforts to find peace apart from God can only be at best temporary fixes to deep and intractable problems. That was the lesson of Rome.

John Stott has written, "The pursuit of peace is a universal human obsession, whether it is international, industrial, domestic or personal peace. Yet more fundamental than all these is peace with God, the reconciled relationship with Him which is the first blessing of justification. ...This is the heart of the peace which the prophets foretold as the supreme blessing of the messianic age, the shalom of the kingdom of God, inaugurated by Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace."¹

The apostle Paul wrote, "*Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*" (Romans 5:1). Paul says that real and lasting peace, the peace that leads to all other forms of peace, is really peace with God. And it's not something we can seek or find in ourselves. Rather, it's a gift that comes to us as a result of a restored relationship with God through Christ.

In verse 10 of Romans 5, Paul describes us as having been enemies of God, at war with Him in our hearts. In the midst of our rebellion Christ died for us so that the war might be brought to an end, and the distance that existed between us and God because of our sin might be eliminated. As a result, we can now have peace *with* God that can produce the peace *of* God.

In one of H.G. Wells' books there's a story of a businessman who was so burdened and worried that he was in danger of having a nervous breakdown. His doctor told him that the only thing that could save him was to find the peace that only fellowship with God can give.

His response to the doctor was, "What?! To think of *that*, up *there*, having fellowship with *me*?! I would just as soon think of cooling my throat by drinking from the galaxy of the Milky Way or shaking hands with the stars!"²

To this man God was completely unreachable. Is that how you feel tonight? Do you feel like God doesn't care about you, like He's a million miles away? Do you lack a sense of peace in your heart tonight?

Peace can come to us when we acknowledge our need for a Savior, and when we give glory to God. We tend to forget that before the angels mentioned the words "Peace on earth" they started out by saying, "*Glory to God in the highest!*" They exalted God first and foremost, because that is the essential key to finding peace on earth. You cannot have real and lasting peace without first seeking the glory of God.

The peace of God is available to everyone, but it's not something you can earn or deserve or manufacture yourself. Rather, it's a gift that God gives you when you yield your life to Jesus as Savior and Lord. As a teenager I struggled with anxiety and loneliness. I yearned to find peace. But it wasn't until I gave my life to Christ that I discovered His peace which passes all understanding. Have you found that peace?

Is it possible that the peace of Christ can redeem the past, heal old wounds, and help people live together in this world without revenge and retaliation? I believe that's exactly what God intended to happen through the Incarnation. If we listen ever so carefully, we can hear the song of promise of the Christmas angels echoing down through the ages, "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests*" (2:14).

III. The Price of Peace.

In many ways Christmas is a warm and fuzzy holiday. There are decorations, beautiful music, evergreen trees, and even a little cuddly baby. It's easy to overlook the purpose behind it all and fail to understand that the reason Christ came into this world was to save us from our sins, and He paid a great price to bring us peace.

There is a large, coffee-table kind of book a friend of mine has that is entitled *Shivering Babe, Victorious Lord: a look at the birth of Christ in the poetry and art of the western world*. In that book there is a reproduction of the painting *The Adoration of the Magi* by the 15th century Flemish artist Rogier van der Weyden. There dressed in vibrant red, the wise men present their gifts to the infant Jesus, while they are surrounded by all manner of beasts and townspeople. The buildings and dress of the figures reflect the architecture and fashion of Belgium in the 1400s, and the pastoral setting depicts the growing fascination people had with the natural world typical of the period.

But in spite of all the exquisite detail and luxuriant colors of the painting, as I looked at it my eye noticed the very center of the whole. There, positioned just over the holy family and the baby Jesus, is a crucifix, a tiny figure of the adult Jesus, arms outstretched on the cross, as if to indicate that all this adoration was to end in the humiliation of the cross of Calvary.

The Gospel writers devote fully one-third to one-half of their gospels to the last few days of Jesus' life – His suffering, His death, and His resurrection. It is clear that from their perspective that the birth of Jesus at Christmas was only a prelude to the passion and death of Christ which came later. It was *the* central feature of the life of Jesus, and it was *the* reason for His coming to the world in the first place. Only two of the writers of the gospels include information about the birth of Christ, but all four of them write extensively about His death and resurrection. This was the price Jesus paid to bring us peace to you and me.

Conclusion.

The reality of the world around us works against the spirit of peace that God intended to accompany the arrival of His Son into the world. Conflict, warfare, commercialism, the busyness of the holidays - they all work against our ability to find peace at Christmas. Jesus said, *“Peace I give you, not as the world gives do I give to you” (Jn. 14:27)*. The peace that is offered at Christmas is different from the kind of peace you can find anywhere else in the world, and only God can give you that kind of peace. It’s a gift He would like to give you tonight this Christmas.

Craig Barnes writes,³ a man wakes up at 2 o’clock in the morning one December to discover that his wife isn’t with him in bed. He gets up and walks down the hall to the nursery, where he finds her sitting in a rocking chair nursing their newborn. He looks at her exhausted face, stained nightgown, and matted hair. In that moment she looks more beautiful to him than she did on their wedding day. Peace comes to his heart.

A woman riding the bus home from work one Christmas looks across the aisle to see a young mother teaching her child to read with a picture book. The woman doesn’t know why, but she begins to tear up. Then she resolves to call her own mother that night to thank her again for all the ways her mother gave her hope, peace, love and joy when she was growing up.

As the fall semester comes to a close and the weather turns cold, a student is feeling like the weight of the world is on his shoulders as he trudges to the library. There are so many exams and papers to complete, and all of them feel like they will determine his entire future. When he gets to the library, he opens the door just in time to allow a blind student to walk through ahead of him. Then he realizes how incredibly blessed he has been. Everything he really needs in life he’s already been given. As he expresses his gratitude to God, peace comes to rest in his heart.

These are holy moments of peace we can experience on ordinary days, and the peace of Christ can come to us at any time. Peace is sometimes hard to find at Christmas. But, as we’ve seen in our passage this night, peace was one of the specific things that the angels announced would come with the birth of the Savior. And the angels sang a song of promise about it. I pray that you will find peace this Christmas, the kind of peace which is only found in God’s Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ, the babe who was laid in a manger.

The first Christmas concert ever given took place outdoors, at night, in a field on the outskirts of Bethlehem. And it was attended by just a bunch of nameless shepherds. There wasn’t any advance billing for this concert about the date, time and place. But what happened that night in the hills of Bethlehem was a surprise of cosmic proportions. And the world has never been the same since. *“Glory to God in the highest! And on earth peace to men on who His favor rests.”*

¹John R.W. Stott, *Romans*, p. 139.

²Quoted by William Barclay in *The Letter to the Romans*, p. 72.

³Craig Barnes in a Christmas Eve sermon at Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, PA, in 2008.