

The Gift of Peace

Sterling UMC
December 5, 2010
Luke 2:8-20

It was dark and cold and the small group of men huddled around their fire to keep warm. In the social strata of the day, you'd have to say they were near the bottom rung. But still, despite their lack of education and social status they were aware of much more than the intelligentsia might have thought. Theirs was a nation under foreign control. The occupying forces were there on what's now called a police action or a peacekeeping exercise. But they knew that there'd never really be peace while enemy soldiers were positioned in the capital. And they knew that if it ever came to war again, they were the sort who gets placed on the front line. They were the expendable ones, the unimportant ones, the ones the officers send out first to test the strength of the opposition forces.

How they longed for peace. If only the prophecies of Isaiah could come true. Surely they heard the scribes read those verses from Isaiah, "The LORD has sworn by his right hand and by his mighty arm: I will not again give your grain to be food for your enemies, and foreigners shall not drink the wine for which you have labored." Well, that day seemed a long way off as they sat out on the hills that night talking about the Roman soldiers making their presence felt all over the countryside.

But as they sat there talking, suddenly their conversation was interrupted. A blinding light appeared above them, the hills were flooded with light and a gleaming angel stood before them. For a moment there wasn't a sound. The men were too terrified to even breathe. Then the angel spoke: "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. He's the one promised by God who'll bring an end to wars, who'll establish his kingdom forever." Then as he finished speaking, suddenly it went from amazing to mind-blowing. Suddenly the sky was filled with a multitude of angels singing praises to God and proclaiming the good news of Jesus' birth. Those insignificant shepherds out in the hills must have listened and watched in utter amazement not only that the prophecies were being fulfilled, but that they were the ones to hear it first.

And what was it the angels sang? "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." Could this mean the end of Roman occupation? You can imagine their hopes rising as they saw this miraculous sight and heard those words of hope. An end to war, a return of freedom, an end to fear. If only it were true.

We too listen to those words and long for peace on earth; peace in our time. Yet we look around the world and all we see after 2000 years of waiting, there is no peace. So we ask ourselves "what's happened to 'peace on earth?'" What was this peace that

Jesus was supposed to be bringing?

Clearly it wasn't an end to wars and terrorism. Not in this world at least. In fact Jesus warned that there'd be wars and rumors of wars, and that they'd go on for ages before the end of the world came. Certainly God has promised that when Christ returns and takes us to be with him we'll have true peace. But what about now? Is there peace for us now?

Can those who are followers of Jesus Christ expect to find peace in their lives? Well on one level we'd have to answer no. Jesus said, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" (Matthew 10:34) The fact that we've decided to follow Jesus and others don't want to have anything to do with him means that inevitably we're going to encounter trouble in this world. Those who are opposed to Christ's rule will be opposed to those who follow Christ.

Yet at the same time we remember that Jesus also told his disciples: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." (John 14:27) There is the gift of peace which Christ brings that passes all understanding. It's not the peace that would see an end to wars. That sort of peace has to wait until the end of the world. Nor is it the sort of transitory peace that we experience from time to time in this world. It's a lasting peace that remains with us even when times are difficult. And it's a real peace, now available to all mankind through faith in the person of Jesus Christ.

Let's take just a moment and unwrap this gift of peace just a bit.

First, on that first Christmas night, God made the way for you to have peace WITH Him, through faith in the One He sent to save you.

Romans 5:1-2, "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand." Do you ever struggle with a guilty conscience? I guess all of us do from time to time. It may even be that the more spiritual we are the more our guilty conscience bothers us. But the coming of God's Son to earth in the form of this little baby boy provides the means by which our consciences can be cleared, our slates wiped clean and we can go to sleep each night knowing that God has nothing against us.

This is God's gift to us. We have a lasting peace not by any merit or effort of our own, but because God sent His Son, and in so doing and through the completed life, death and resurrection of Christ, made peace with us. If we take nothing else away from the service today it should be that. The gospel we proclaim is a gospel of peace. The gift of peace with God is made available to all people today. Have you received that gift?

But the peace that Jesus brought was also a peace that extends to those around us. We can have peace with others. It's a peace that affects our relationships. It's a peace that breaks down walls. It transcends racial and cultural boundaries.

Ephesians 2:14-16 says, "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility..." Through Jesus' coming there's now no reason for hostility between people. We're all reconciled to God so we can also be reconciled to one another.

But let's face it, peace between people doesn't come automatically. Sometimes it's easy but other times we have to work at it. Sometimes we have to strive to live in peace with one another.

But when we have peace with God then the natural result of that is peace with others. When we remember how much he has forgiven us, how can we not forgive others? When we ponder how much he loved us even when we were unlovable, how can we not love others? When we think about the example he set and how he lived and served others, especially those who were the most lowly and needy, how can we not extend our hand to help those around us?

Are you working at bringing Christ's peace to bear on your part of the world? On your relationships, your family life, your workplace situation? God has put us here to continue Christ's work of bringing peace to the world.

Finally, Christ's coming means that we can have peace in our own hearts and minds. It means we can stop worrying. Why can we stop worrying? Because we know that God has done everything needed to make us right with him. He's given us his only Son to live as a human being and to die on a cross for us. And if God has given us his own Son, then there's nothing else we might need that God wouldn't give us along with him.

You may have heard the story of the rich art collector who had one of the greatest collections of art in the world. It was full of such beauty that you'd think he would have been one of the happiest men in the world. But in fact that wasn't the case. His only son had been killed in a car accident at a young age and the man had never really gotten over it. You see he'd loved his son so much. He was so proud of him when he graduated from college and he had great plans for him to follow on in the family business. And then he died and the man was devastated. So he put all his energy into compiling the best art collection he could manage in memory of his son. Well, the man died without an heir and when his will was read it was announced that his art collection would be auctioned off. On the day of the auction art dealers came from far and wide hoping for a bargain.

Well, the first item for auction was a portrait of a young man by an unknown painter. It wasn't a particularly good portrait. None of the dealers was interested in it. They were waiting for the real art to come up for sale. The auctioneer called for bids and there was silence. Not a hand moved. He lowered his suggested amount and eventually an old

man in back bid a small amount for it. He was the art collector's butler and he realized that the portrait was that of the man's son, whom he too had loved. It had been painted just before the young man died. He valued the painting not for its artistic value but for its sentimental value. Well, the art dealers were glad to have that out of the way. Now they could get on with the real sale. But then the auctioneer announced, "Ladies and Gentlemen I'm required to read the following clause of the will. It reads 'Whoever buys the portrait of my son gets everything else as well.' The auction is now over." Whoever has the son has everything!

Romans 8:31-32: "If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?"

How do you respond to stresses in your life? Do you worry about them, or do you pass them on to God. Do you trust God to give you everything you need? Again, listen to the words of Paul as he writes to the Philippians: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:6-7) Jesus came to bring peace. Peace with God. Peace with others. Peace of mind. A peace which passes all understanding. A peace that comes from knowing that the God of the whole universe cares about me; cares about you. And the proof of that care is seen in that tiny baby lying in a manger in Bethlehem all those years ago. And that proof continues here today at this table as we remember and celebrate what He came to do for us.

Do you need peace this morning? Maybe you are at war with yourself this morning. Worry and fear have got a hold of your mind and spirit. Maybe you are at war with God because you have sinned against Him. Maybe you are at war with other people. Well, God's message to you this morning is the same good news that the angels announced to the lowly shepherds long ago, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."