

Receiving The Gift Of Peace

Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

Sunday, December 22, 2019

The shepherds were the lowest rung of people in the society in those days. The poorest, most unsightly and least important group of people in Jewish society at the time of Jesus. It is to these people, not the kings, or the priests or anyone of importance that God presented the grandest birth announcement. And the birth announcement came like this.

When the shepherds were minding their own business taking care of their flocks at night, suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared to them surrounded by what Luke describes as “the radiance of the glory of God”. I am sure the angel waited for the shepherds to adjust to the shock of his appearance to the shepherds before these words were spoken, ***“Do not be afraid! I bring you good news of great joy to all people”***. You think that the shepherds were all ears? I think so. Now with the full attention of every single shepherd on the field, the angel tells them this.

The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! ¹² And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.

This was the announcement that the Jewish people had been waiting to hear for centuries. This is the announcement that was given to the wise men in a super subtle way through the sign of the “heliacal rising” that I preached about last year. But this announcement was different. This announcement was dramatic, spectacular and direct. And to reinforce the amazing birth announcement, it was followed by a choir performance that was as grand as the announcement itself. As soon as that announcement was made, the sky was filled with heavenly beings singing in a way that

filled the space with the radiance of God's glory. How much glory? Just enough to give the poor shepherds a glimpse of the grandeur of heaven without giving them a heart attack 😊 They appeared in the heavens and they sang the first Christmas carol. And we have no video or audio recording of this presentation, but we do have the lyrics recorded so you can imagine how important they must be! And the words of that first Christmas carol go like this.

***Glory to God in highest heaven,
and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased***

There are two parts to this message. The first part deals with what happens in heaven. It says, "glory to God in the highest heaven". So who is getting the glory here as a result of Christ's birth? The God who sits in the highest heaven. This is a very big deal. Let me explain. There are different levels of power and different centers of power in the seen and unseen world. In each of these power centers both people and spiritual beings exercise power. Human beings were created with some god like powers when God us in his image. The power to choose, the power to create and the power to give and take life even.

When God gave human beings dominion over the earth, His original intention was to bless them. That means he gave them the power to rule the earth according to the will of God and in so doing, to please God and glorify him who is God in the highest heaven. Unfortunately, humankind did not use their power to glorify God, but instead used their power to try and become even more like God themselves. What was the result? Disconnection of that deep communion with the real God. Adam and Eve then realized was that when you loose your connection with the real God, you also lose the glue that created intimacy between each other. So think about this. People were created to be in community. Without community no human being can have peace. That is why in the penal system, the worst punishment you can get besides being put to death is solitary

confinement. You see, human beings were designed for community. But without God no human being can have real community. That is why there is no peace in this world. In a world in which the real God is pushed away, you have other powers taking over and all those other powers fill the world with strife and power struggles and restlessness.

This is the situation into which, the birth announcement of Jesus Christ takes place. Now the angels are saying, the birth of Jesus brings glory to God in the highest heaven. When this happens something fundamental is corrected in the whole universe. And this correction has an amazing impact right here on earth.

This is the second thing being referred to in the lyrics of the first Christmas carol. It is what happens on earth as a result of the birth of Christ. And the song says, Jesus' birth will have the effect of giving rise to peace on earth on those who find favor with God. "Peace on whom His favor rests". That is the way the NIV puts it and I love that phrasing.

How are God's favor, God's peace and God's glory connected? That is the crux of what we want to consider today. You see, Jesus' presence on earth fixes a fundamental problem with the universe and God is glorified in the highest heaven, right? Now when you look at the earth itself what you see is that Jesus' presence here on earth, has the effect of revealing the truest intention of every human heart. I did not make this up. These are the prophetic words of Simeon in Luke 2:35. You see, Jesus' birth will expose those who are for God and those who are against Him. Those who are for Christ, will receive Him in their hearts. Because they do, they will find God's favor. When you find God's favor, even though you will now be set on a collision course with this world and all who oppose Christ, you will be able to navigate all that opposition with peace in your heart.

To see how this works in practice I would like you to ponder the example of Mary, the mother of Jesus. You see, in Luke chapter 1, in the birth prophecy to Mary, the angel tells Mary, twice that she has found favor with God. Then the angel tells her the big news of her upcoming pregnancy.

Now at the very beginning this was a big challenge given to Mary, right? Mary was given the assignment of bearing a miraculous child, which in the eyes of society would have looked just like a child born out of wedlock. So Mary's pregnancy carried not just the risk of being viewed with the doubt, shame and scorn of society but also the risk of death itself, because in those days, adultery was dealt with by stoning to death. How was Mary able to handle this bewildering responsibility with no advanced notice? There is only one explanation. She had a deep peace in her heart about this responsibility, a peace derived from having the favor of God who is glorified in the highest Heavens.

When you look at the rest of Mary's life, what do we see? Do you see a peaceful, idyllic existence? Not really. When Jesus was a boy he got lost. Every parents nightmare. When he gets older and starts His ministry he takes a path that actually gets him into a lot of trouble. There is a point in Mark 3:21 where even Jesus' own family members think he is crazy. I am sure his mother was not in that group, but certainly Mary would have had a hard time figuring out what Jesus was going to do when he started getting death threats. Imagine the thoughts that might have raced through Mary's head then. Now most people's worse case scenarios never happen. But Mary's did. The death threats against Jesus were executed as you know in the worst way possible. She sees Jesus end up hanging from the cross. It was prophesied by Simeon that she would feel like an arrow pierced her soul. Take that as a definition of 10 on the pain scale. So Mary did not have an idyllic existence.

But when you put all these instances of her life together a few things become clear. This promised peace certainly is not referring to a smooth and idyllic life. In fact every one of

Mary's challenges was **because** she said yes to Christ. - Because she said yes to Christ, she had to be out of her home town when she gave birth -because she said yes to Christ she had to flee Egypt as soon as the baby was born. The list is endless. When you say yes to Christ, you will be put on a path that is narrow, full of challenges and that will define the cross that is yours alone to bear. Saying yes to Christ is saying yes to a cross.

But saying yes to Christ, is the very thing that gets you the favor of God. And when you have the favor of God, **you will be given the capacity to navigate every challenge thrown in your way.**

- When Mary said yes to the angel, she calmly asks the angel clarifying questions and then says, yes to the assignment.

-When she is at a wedding at Cana and there is a wine crisis, she calmly asks Jesus to do something about it.

- When Jesus responds very cryptically that his time was not yet come, she calmly tells the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them to do

- At the worst moment in her life, when Jesus was hanging from the cross and almost all the disciples had left, she was given the capacity to hang in there with Jesus in spite of her soul piercing pain.

When you have the favor of God, you have the capacity to handle any challenge, crisis or pain. If you had that capacity, would you also have peace in every situation? I think so!

So what is the message of Christmas? The message is that Jesus's birth has a heavenly effect and an earthly effect. The effect in heaven is that God in the highest heaven is glorified, setting right a fundamental aspect of the universe that had gone wrong when sin entered the world.

And the earthly effect is that people's true intentions are exposed, people will be separated into two camps, those who receive Christ and those who don't. Those who receive Christ will find God's favor and after that no matter how rough a path lay ahead for them, they will be able to navigate it with true peace inside of them just as Mary, the mother of Jesus did.

This Christmas, I hope you ponder this. With Christ in your heart, you have the favor of God, in the highest heaven. With God's favor, you also have the gift of God's peace. May the peace of Christ be upon you. Let us pray.