

December 22, 2013
Christmas is Not Your Birthday

Peace...
Luke 2:8-15

Opening words: There are 365 days each year, but Christmas day is special. What is there not to love? That day generates so many things. Our favorite Christmas cookies tempt us for weeks. Our community is illuminated with Christmas lights. Our Christmas trees are decorated with ornaments that remind us of the past. Our calendars are filled with Christmas parties, and our Christmas wish list contains the desires of our heart. Christmas is a time of family and friends. You know it is true. It is easy to forget that Christmas is a time to remember the birth of Jesus.

This is the fourth sermon in my five-part sermon series, *Christmas Is Not Your Birthday*. This study was originally developed by Mike Slaughter of the Ginghamburg Church (a United Methodist congregation) in Tipp City, Ohio. Each message is designed to help you escape the trappings of this month and reclaim the true meaning of Christmas. This morning's message is no different. This morning's Gospel lesson is Luke's account of the birth of Christ. What I would like you to do is listen carefully to the angel's announcement to the shepherds. Let me call this message "*Peace...*" May God give you ears to hear this morning's Gospel lessons, Luke 2:1-7 and Luke 2:8-20.

Luke 2:1-20 ¹ In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to their own town to register. ⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

⁸And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." ¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." ¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby,

who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Not everyone was happy when poet Elizabeth Barrett married Robert Browning in 1846. Her father did not approve, so they married in secret. After the wedding, the Brownings sailed for Italy, where they lived for the rest of their lives. Elizabeth's parents had disowned her, but she never gave up on the relationship. Almost weekly she wrote them letters. They never replied. After 10 years, she received a large box in the mail. Inside, Elizabeth found all of her letters; not one had been opened! Today, those letters are among the most beautiful in classical English literature. Had her parents only read a few of them, their relationship with Elizabeth might have been restored. How many people do you know who can relate to the Elizabeth Barrett Browning story?

For many people, the Elizabeth Barrett Browning story is the story of Christmas. They just can't forget. They just can't move on. Is anyone in your life an expert at holding a grudge? The event may have happened years ago, the details may have gotten fuzzy. Be honest with yourself. At some point, the details stopped mattering. Only "the principle" matters now. Pride sets in and a wedge is forged between the two parties. One party is always going to 'teach the other party a lesson'. The truth is, no one ever wins and no lessons are learned. The only thing that really happens is lost opportunities and lost ties. The only thing the parties demonstrate is their smallness. It takes a big person to initiate reconciliation.

This is part of the Good News of Christmas! God has made the first move to reconcile with us. That is what the angels came to tell the shepherds. The generations of trying to reconcile with God with laws and sacrifices were over. They didn't work! So God came into the world to eliminate the tension between us and Him. That is what the angels are saying to the shepherds in verse fourteen, "*Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.*" We hear that message on reconciliation more clearly in Second Corinthians 5:19, which says, "*God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.*" That is the Good News of Christmas. God came into the world to end the conflict with us. On this fourth Sunday of Advent, I want you to do one thing. Take a few minutes out of your busy holiday schedules and ponder this divine truth with me. The God of the universe wants to have a relationship with you! That divine truth changes everything. It should effect every relationship you hold in your life.

So today on the fourth Sunday of Advent, I want to talk about Jesus' ministry of reconciliation. His presence has brought three different kinds of peace into the world.

They do not stand alone, they are interrelated. You know it is true. They are life altering. They became a reality on the day you came to know Jesus as your Lord and Savior. There is **peace with God**. The kind of confidence that comes from the fact that you know your soul is safe. There is the **peace of God**. The kind of confidence you have you have knowing our world is in good hands. There is **peace with others**. The kind of peace you have that comes from knowing you have done everything possible to fix all the broken relationships in your life. So if you peace lovers are ready to begin looking at peace, say, **"Amen!"**

Peace with God

In 1555, Nicholas Ridley was burned at the stake because of his witness for Christ. On the night before Ridley's execution, his brother offered to remain with him in the prison chamber to be of assistance and comfort. Nicholas declined the offer and replied that he meant to go to bed and sleep as quietly as ever he did in his life. If you knew you were going to die tomorrow, how would you sleep tonight?

The first kind of peace is *peace with God*. When you have peace with God, you have spiritual peace. If you don't have spiritual peace, then you will never experience the other two. Romans 5:1 says, *"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."* If you look at the attitudes you hold, you will find the great battle with God. The battle is over the control of your life. Are you in control of your life, or have you surrendered to God? Jesus came into the world to settle this conflict between you and God. He came into the world to act as a bridge between you and God. Do you have peace with God? Are you still at war with God? How you answer those questions changes everything.

The founder of the great Methodist movement was John Wesley. His brother Charles was a minister too. Charles was the great hymn writer for the movement. He wrote more than 1600 hymns. (Some of them aren't bad.) The words of those hymns taught those early Methodists about God. Did you know he wrote the first hymn in every Methodist hymnal ever published, *O For Thousand Tongues to Sing*. He knew something about words and theology. This is what he wrote:

I rest beneath the Almighty's shade,
My grieves expire, my troubles cease;
Thou, Lord, on whom my soul is stayed,
Wilt keep me still in perfect peace.

On the day that I accepted Christ as my Lord and Savior, I experienced one emotion. It wasn't joy, it was relief. The battle was over. I was at peace with God. He was now in charge of my life. Charles Wesley knew of what he wrote, *keep me still in perfect peace*.

I am asking you this question because it is so important. I don't want to assume anything about the condition of your soul. Have you unwrapped the greatest gift you will ever receive; do you know Jesus as your Lord and Savior? If your answer is anything but "yes", don't wait. You have been at war with God long enough. The gift of Jesus offers us spiritual peace. And all of God's peaceful people said, "**Amen!**" The first find of peace is peace with God.

Peace of God

The second kind of peace is the *peace of God*. If you know Jesus as your Lord and Savior, then you know it is true. You no longer have to fix everything in this world. You can trust God because you believe in the end, God will win. Consider these two verses with me from the fourth chapter of Philippians, verses six and seven, "*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*" You can entrust this world to God. That is an easy thing to do, because mankind isn't doing such a great job.

Did you know that of the more than 3500 years of recorded history, there have only been 286 years of peace? You do the math. That means complete peace has ruled only eight per cent of the time in our world. I hate to admit it, but most of our efforts to establish world peace have failed. Mankind has drawn up more than 8000 peace treaties, and most of them have been broken. Our world is at war today in various locations. We are at war today on many levels. A portion of the evening news demonstrates the violence that exists in our world. There are some things you just have to entrust to God. That trust generates with God. If you are willing to entrust our world to God, then say, "**Amen!**" The first kind of peace is peace with God. The second kind of peace is peace of God. The third kind of peace is *peace with others*.

Peace with Others

I love this story: When the Civil War ended, there was a great amount of hatred in the country. Some feared it would never end. However, time has a way of healing old wounds. In time, former president of the Confederacy Jefferson Davis, died. Sometime later, former general of the Union forces and former president of the United States Ulysses Grant, died. However, their widows, Varina Davis and Julia Grant, lived on and settled near each other. As fate would have it, they became the closest of friends. They did something their husbands failed to do. They modeled peace for a new generation.

The third kind of peace is *peace with others*. This is the kind of peace that comes to your life when you apply the faith to your life. It may not be an easy thing to do, but it is an important thing to do. You can find the Sermon on the Mount in the fifth chapter of Matthew. Verse nine says, "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall inherit the Kingdom of God.*" The word 'blessed' means happy; happy are the peacemakers. It takes two people to reconcile. God only expects you to do your part.

Have you done everything in your power to fix all your relationships?

In just a few days it will be Christmas. The wonderful thing about Christmas is that it is a time of family and friends. However, the hard thing about Christmas is that it is a time of family and friends. Are you looking forward to seeing everyone in your life? Is there someone in your life you have been avoiding because of some past conflict? Let this be the Christmas of reconciliation. Let this be the Christmas when you fix a broken relationship. Let this be the Christmas that you put a smile on the face of God. Jesus offered the world reconciliation. Couldn't you offer reconciliation to your little corner of the world? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

For the shepherds, it was just another day. They were working the night shift. They had no clue the world was about to change forever. It was the angels that told them that something big had happened. A baby had been born, and the world would never be the same again. They said it then, but it is still true today: *"Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**