

December 23, 2018

The Gifts of Christmas

The Gift of Peace

Luke 2:8-14

Opening words: Did you know, historians from England, Egypt, Germany and India tell us, since the year 3600 BC, the world has only been free of war 292 years. During that same time period, there have been 14,352 wars, killing 3.7 billion people. The amount of property destroyed during those wars would pay for a golden belt large enough to surround the world, 98 miles wide and 33 feet thick. Did you know, that since 650 BC, there have been 1,656 arms races, and only 16 have not ended in war. Most countries involved in a war end up in economic collapse. Did you know there are twenty wars raging in our world today, taking more than 1,000 lives annually? Can I state the obvious? Our time is not the only one. There has always been a shortage of peace in our world. However, political peace is only one kind of peace. This is the question you must answer this morning: How peaceful are you?

This is message number four in my five-part sermon series, *The Gifts of Christmas*. We are looking at the spiritual, eternal gifts that we have received from God when we accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. We are reminded of them annually, as we light the Advent candles. We have already looked at the gifts of hope, love, and joy. Tomorrow night, Christmas Eve, we will look at the gift of a Savior. This morning we look at the gift of peace. Our scripture reading is Luke 2:8-14. Let me call this message *The Gift of Peace*.

Luke 2:8-14 ⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

In the first two chapters of the Gospel of Luke, there are four hymns. The third hymn is sung by the angels to the shepherds at the announcement of the birth of Jesus. It is called *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*, the first words in the Latin Vulgate translation. You know the English translation of the entire hymn, *Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests*. If you have heard those simple words in the past, say, "**Amen!**" The question is, what kind of peace?

We find ourselves today in the second chapter of Luke. The scene is a familiar one. Perhaps it is so familiar, the shock has worn off. After centuries of waiting, the savior of the world has been born. For generations, everyone longed for his arrival, because he would solve all their problems. Everyone assumed he would be born in the palace; after all, he was a king. Everyone was wrong. (You know what they say about assuming.) He was born in a barn. To the world, his parents, Joseph and Mary, were just another poor couple. Aren't the poor always having children they can't afford? According to the Gospel of Matthew, they named him Jesus. The name means "to save." It was the greatest moment in human history, but the world almost missed it. An announcement had to be made. It was delivered to an unimpressive group of hard-working shepherds, despised by the religious of their world, but obviously valued by God. Our scripture lesson for today tells us, once the announcement is given, the messenger is surrounded by a great company of singing angels. Their sheet music is long gone, but their words remain. *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.* We know those words because they are great words. But what do those words mean? To understand the words, you must answer this question, what kind of peace? How do you interpret that verse? It is not a simple task. If you are ready to interpret that verse say, "**Amen!**"

One of my favorite Christmas movies is Home Alone. Last year, my Advent/Christmas sermon series was called *Christmas Goes to the Movies*. On Christmas Eve we saw a clip from that movie. You may remember the background. *Home Alone* was released in 1990. It was made for \$18 million and has grossed approximately \$354,000,000. It was filmed in Winnetka, Illinois and stars Joe Pesci, Daniel Stern, and Macaulay Culkin as Kevin McCallister. You remember the story line. Eight-year-old Kevin finds himself home alone, because he is lost in the shuffle as his family leaves for their Christmas vacation. At first, he celebrates his independence, but in time he begins to value his family. Near the end of the movie, Kevin begins to regret how he has treated his family. He walks into a church and confesses his feelings to a stranger, who has his own family problems. The stranger, Kevin's neighbor, a weird old man, has a great line. He says, "You're in church now. This is the place to come when you are feeling bad about yourself." It is a secular movie, but it holds a divine truth.

Some believe the angels are speaking about internal peace. Have you ever come to church to find some rest? The world is exhausting, because the world promotes your failures. I have sat alone in the comfort of this church's sanctuary countless times, because I need to find some peace. I have sat alone in the comfort of this sanctuary because I need to experience Jesus. Augustine once said, "*Our hearts are restless until we find our rest in God.*" Internal peace is important! Can I ask you a question? How exhausted are you? If you hunger for internal peace, say, "**Amen!**" Internal peace is important, but peace with others is equally important. I love this story:

I love baseball. I remember the night Hank Aaron (born 1934) broke Babe Ruth's home run record. He held that record for thirty-three years. When his 23-year baseball career

ended, he was inducted into Baseball's Hall of Fame and went to work for the Atlanta Braves. In my eyes, Hank Aaron is a somebody. One night, he was checking into a hotel, but to the clerk, he was a nobody. She didn't recognize him and told him there were no rooms available. The owner of the hotel recognized Hank Aaron and pulled the clerk to the side. He said, "That is Hank Aaron. He is the one who broke Babe Ruth's home run record. Tell him we will find him a room." The clerk went back to the counter and said to Hank Aaron, "I am sorry, Mr. Aaron. I didn't recognize you. Of course, we have a room for you. I didn't know you were a somebody." I love Hank Aaron's response. He said, "Everybody is a somebody." How would our world change, if we treated everybody like a somebody?

Some believe the angels are speaking about peace with others. There is a certain amount of logic to that interpretation. After all, God sees everybody as a somebody, because God loves everyone. It is God's desire to have everyone accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior, so God can spend eternity with everyone. If you treated everyone as a somebody, how would your relationships change? You know the truth. Revenge is never sweet. Violence breeds more violence. Hatred poisons the soul. Resentment, jealousy, bigotry, and prejudices are spiritual viruses that will kill your soul. Hank Aaron was right! Everybody is a somebody. If you have a relationship in your life that needs fixing, say, "**Amen!**" Those interpretations are not completely wrong. Internal peace is important. Peace with others is important. There is only one problem with those interpretations. They simply aren't big enough. We believe in a great big God. This is the correct interpretation:

The angels are speaking about peace with God. When you have peace with God, you have internal peace. When you have peace with God, you have peace with others. When you have peace with God, you have complete peace. It is the kind of peace that satisfies your entire being. The great hymn writer of the Methodist movement, Charles Wesley (1707-1788) was at peace with God. He wrote approximately 6,500 hymns. In one of his hymns, he talks about his peace with God. Listen to these words:

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

Charles Wesley was at peace with God. This is the question you must answer today: Are you at peace with God? If that question makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

Nicholas Ridley (1550-1555) was an English Bishop in London. However, he is remembered for being one of the greatest martyrs in the history of the church. His witness for Christ was unflinching. He died burned at a stake. On the night before his execution, his brother came to visit him in prison. He wanted to add some comfort. Ridley refused the offer. He told his brother to go home, because he wanted to get a good night's rest, because he was going to meet God the next day. Those who guarded

over him said he slept soundly that night. Can I ask you a personal question? How well do you sleep? I will be honest with you. I am not a great sleeper, because I don't want to waste time. I have things to do. However, the one thing I do not worry about is my salvation. You know my story. I have told it to you in the past.

In December of 1974, I was a senior in high school. The school levy in Warren failed that year, so I had most of the month free with no school. During that long month, I sold Christmas trees with the rest of the church youth group. I liked selling Christmas trees, because I like selling anything. The best part about selling Christmas trees was my friends in our youth group. I still have an emotional tie with many of them. The most intriguing member of my high school youth group was a girl named Susan. She was also the prettiest girl in my youth group. She was the first one in my high school youth group to accept Jesus as her Lord and Savior. She was eager to share her new faith. On December 16, 1974, she sat next to me and asked me a question which changed my entire life. Susan asked me, "Russ, would you like to go to heaven?" I am not sure that I heard the question at first. I was just so excited that she was talking to me! When I heard the question again, would you like to go to heaven, I answered, "Yes." This is the the truth: I would have said YES to anything she asked me. Would you like to go to the dump and shoot rats? YES! Would you like to hold up the corner gas station? YES! However, those were not her questions. She asked me if I wanted to go to heaven. I said, "Yes", and she told me about how Jesus died for me. My life has never been the same since. I wouldn't trade my life with anyone. My life is not perfect, but I know beyond a shadow of a doubt, I am going to heaven. I know, I am not a perfect person, but I do worship a perfect savior. Since that day, I have not missed a minute of sleep worrying about my eternity. I live a spiritually peaceful life. So, let me ask you again. How well do sleep at night? This is the correct interpretation. If you think the angels are speaking about peace with God, say, "**Amen!**"

The angels sang those words to the shepherds years ago, but their words are still true today, *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.* How well do you sleep? Are you at peace with God? And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"