

December 22, 2019

Rediscovering Christmas  
Peace on Earth  
Luke 2:8-14

**Opening words:** When my father died in 1996, he was at odds with his brother-in-law, my Uncle Gary. They never cared for one another. They had opposite opinions on every topic. My father saw my Uncle Gary as an arrogant New Yorker. My Uncle Gary saw my father as a loud Midwesterner. Maybe they both were both right. For decades, they tried to expose one another's limitations. In their battle, no one won. Their conflict was hard on their wives and their conflict distanced their children from their own family. This is the sad truth. I believe, if they would have reconciled at some point, they would have liked one another. They may have become friends. That never happened. Do you have anyone in your life who needs to experience reconciliation?

This is sermon number four in my new five-part sermon series, *Rediscovering Christmas*. This morning's message is a reconciliation. In this sermon series, I am reminding you Christmas is not just a secular holiday. It is a religious holiday. It is not about Santa Baby. It is about the birth of our Lord, the Savior of the world, the incarnation of God, Jesus. I began on the First Sunday of Advent, and I will conclude this Tuesday, Christmas Eve. Our Gospel reading for today is the same as last week, Luke 2:8-14. Let me call this message *Peace on Earth*.

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

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

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

The Savior of the world Jesus of Nazareth (Born 4 BC) once said, "*Blessed are the peace makers because they shall be called the children of God.*" (Matthew 5:9) Those are good words on this sacred day. If you are tired of conflict say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves today in the second chapter of Luke. It is the same reading as last week so the opening words may sound familiar. The scene is familiar because we visit it annually. Joseph returns home to Bethlehem to be counted in the national census. A census in the Roman Empire was taken for two reasons. The first is to be counted for

military service. However, Joseph was excused from military service because he was Jew. The second is everyone had to be counted was taxation. Joseph probably wished he could have been excused from taxes, but he wasn't. Joseph didn't travel alone. He travels with his betrothed, Mary. She is pregnant and gives birth shortly after they arrive in Bethlehem. She gave birth to a little boy. That baby would change history. There were many questions about the boy's biological father. Some say it was Joseph. Some say the boy was the very son of God. The answer to that question is found in our reading for today. This scene is equally familiar.

Shepherds are out in the fields in the hillside surrounding Jerusalem. We love the shepherds but that was not the case of their own generation. Their generation looked down on the shepherds because their vocation didn't permit them to carry out the various washings of their faith. They are basically ignored by their society, but they are not forgotten by God. They are favored by God. They are the first to be told that the long-awaited Messiah had been born. The message is delivered by angels. In the Bible, angels are messengers, not protectors. The great announcement carries two great truths. First, the Savior of the world had been born. We looked at the concept last time. Second, the Savior would bring peace. That is good news because our world seems to have a shortage of peace.

Did you know there are fifty-five military conflicts in the world at this moment? That fact came from a Wikipedia. This is how it breaks down. There are four active military conflicts which have taken more than 10,000 lives in the last year. There are eight military conflicts which have taken 1,000 and 10,000 lives in the last year. There are twenty-five military conflicts which have taken between 100 and 1,000 lives in the past year. There are eighteen military conflicts in our world that have taken less than 100 lives in the past year. I think, one life is too many.

Did you know, according to an organization called the Gun Violence Archive, there have been 397 mass gun shootings in 2019 in the United States. The first happened on January the first in Tallahassee, Florida. The last happened on December 15 in Columbus, Georgia. Our society is so violent, mass shooting no longer grab the headlines. That 397 figure may go up, because there are a few days left in this year. If you agree our world needs a good dose of peace say, "**Amen!**" Unfortunately, this is the sad truth.

In the Gospel lesson for today has nothing to do with political or civil peace. However, it has everything to do with spiritual peace. Do you remember what the angels sang? (verse 14) "*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.*" In other words, peace does not come to all. Peace only comes to those with whom God is pleased. Do you think God is pleased with you? God's peace can be looked at in three ways.

**The first kind of peace is the peace of God.** I have seen it countless times in the

ministry. A church member is facing a crisis in their life. Surgery can no longer be avoided, so the date is set. A few days before the surgery I will be in the home of the soon to be patient. I go for one reason, prayer. After some small talk and a cool beverage the time comes. We stand up, hold hands and pray. A few minutes later, I say, "Amen." With words hard to find, the one with the problem will look at me and say, "Russ, I don't know how this is all going to work out, but everything is going to be ok." With moist eyes and a slight smile we all agree.

The peace of God is an emotional peace. It really is quite in creditable. With everything the world throws at us, addictions, death, disappointments, financial hardship, and the rest, we know everything is going to be ok. The Apostle Paul understood the peace of God. We hear it in Philippians 4:6-7, *"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."* The peace of God is an emotional peace. And all of God's peaceful people said, "**Amen!**" Have you ever experienced peace in the middle of one of life's storms?

**The second kind of peace is peace with God.** Nicholas Ridley (1500-1555) was the Bishop of London. His faith was unshakable. He made powerful enemies. In 1555, he was burned at the stake because of his witness for Christ. History tells us, 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 seemed confused by the offer and declined it. He told his brother to leave early because he wanted to get a good night's sleep. The next day was going to be a big day because he was going to meet the Lord. If you knew you were going to die tomorrow, how would you sleep tonight? Peace with God is a spiritual peace.

The founder of the great Methodist movement was John Wesley (1703-1791). His brother, Charles (1707-1788) was a minister too. Charles was the great hymn writer for the movement. He also wrote more than 1600 hymns. Did you know he wrote the first hymn ever in every Methodist hymnal ever published, *O For Thousand Tongues to Sing*. He knew something about words. He wrote these words about peace:

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, peace. Romans 5:1 says, *"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."* And all of God's peaceful people said, "**Amen!**" Are you at peace with God?

**The third kind of peace is peace with others.** Not everyone was happy when poet Elizabeth Barrett (1806-1861) married Robert Browning (1812-1889) in 1846. Her father did not approve so their marriage was secret. After the wedding the Brownings sailed for Italy, where they lived for the rest of their lives. But even though her parents had disowned her, Elizabeth 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 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. Is anyone in your life an expert at holding a grudge? They just can't forget or move on? The event may have happened years ago, the details may have gotten fuzzy. At some point the details stopped mattering. Only "the principle" mattered. Pride has set in and forged a wedge between the two parties. One party is always going to teach the other party a lesson. The truth is no one wins those situations, no one ever learns a lesson. The only thing that really happens is opportunities are lost and loneliness wins. Both parties demonstrate their smallness. It takes a big person to initiate reconciliation.

Peace with others is relational. What are you missing out on because you refuse to forgive? Making-up with others is the Christian thing to do. Second Corinthians 5:19 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."* And all of God's peaceful people said, **"Amen!"** Christmas is a great time for reconciliation. Is there someone in your life you have battled long enough?

Ours is not the only generation of Americans who have lacked peace. Peace has been lacking in every generation. When the Civil War ended in 1865 hatred filled our 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 (1808-1889) died. Sometime earlier, the former general of the Union forces and former President of the United States, Ulysses Grant (1822-1885) died. However, their widows, Varina Davis (1826-1906) and Julia Grant (1822-1902), outlived their husbands and in time became close friends. They did something their husbands failed to do. They modeled peace for a new generation.

Wouldn't it be nice if you modeled peace for your world? Wouldn't it be nice living with the peace of God? Our lives are filled with great hardship, but we have peace because we have God. Wouldn't it be nice to live at peace with God? Your room in heaven is waiting for you. Wouldn't it be nice to live at peace with others? When the last service of Christmas Eve is over, I go home. I am tired, but I can't sleep. I am wired. I sit alone looking at all the colors my Christmas tree. You may think I am crazy, but I can still hear the words of the angels, *"Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace to men*

*on whom his favor rests.*" Those words are well crafted, but Jesus said it better, *"Blessed are the peace makers because they shall be called the children of God."* And all of God's peaceful people said, **"Amen!"**