

Christmas Peace and Joy

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Luke 2:8-14

Luke 2:8-14

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

In verse 14 we read:

and on earth peace...

This year like so many years over the last century, America is again at war. According the United Nations, there are eight major wars going on right now around the world, those with at least with a thousand battlefield deaths a year. And there are two dozen lesser conflicts in places like Africa. There have been 20 major civil wars in Africa in the last 40 years. Israel, India and Pakistan have been in states of almost continual warfare for nearly 60 years.

Peace on earth? There are several hundred thousand lawsuits filed in federal courts each year and there are over 100 million lawsuits filed in state courts each year.

In 2001 New York City was hit with a \$14 million judgment because a subway train didn't stop in time to avoid hitting someone who was lying on the tracks trying to commit suicide.

In Texas a woman who found out that her dentist husband was cheating on her ran him over in a parking lot. Guess who was sued? I want you to think like a lawyer. A wife runs her husband over in a parking lot. Who gets sued? Not the wife! Not the husband. The parking lot owner! In this case, the parking lot was owned by the Hilton Hotel chain. Hilton Hotels were sued for the negligent training of employees making it too easy for a wife to run over a husband.

Peace on earth? American is drowning in lawsuits.

The angels promised peace on earth as the result of the birth of the Christ Child, yet as we look around America, our country is as polarized politically as it has ever been. America is divided on a hundred issues from the rightness of the war in Iraq, to the propriety of domestic spying as a weapon to battle terrorism, to social issues like abortion, gay marriage, the teaching of intelligent design in schools, tax policies. CNN viewers can hardly bear watching Fox News. And Fox News viewers simply cannot stomach CNN.

Peace on earth? We would settle for peace in our homes. Somewhere around 35% of all marriages end in divorce. It is not as bad as the 50% number that is often wrongly stated. But, of course, this number does not include all of those who stay married, but live in a constant state of marital warfare. Every marriage counselor, every pastor has heard stories from husbands and wives who can barely tolerate each other. The husband says: She is just impossible. No one could live with her. She can't let go of anything. She throws mistakes into my face that I made 15 years ago. She is sexually frigid. She is terrible with money. She has put on a ton of weight.

The wife says: No one could possibly live with my husband. He is controlling to the nth degree. It is his way or the highway. He is totally non-communicative, totally unaffectionate except in bed and then he is unbelievably demanding. Most of the time he just sits silently in front of the TV watching sports or channel surfing, or playing on his computer.

There have been so many attempts at peace on earth. A few have succeeded like the Camp David Accords back in the 1970's that ended a 30 year state of war between Egypt and Israel.

Those peace accords have basically held but they resulted in the assassination of one of the peace treaty signers – Anwar Sadat of Egypt. Many peace treaties are dead on arrival. How many Middle East peace plans have there been in the last 20 years? The Oslo Accords, the Sharm el-Sheikh Summit, which produced the so-called roadmap to peace between Israel and the Palestinians four years ago but the violence and the conflict between those two peoples continues this Christmas.

The classic and most tragic failure at peace was, of course, the Munich Conference back in 1938 which resulted in a separate agreement between British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and Adolph Hitler in which the British government as well as other governments agreed to the dismantling of Czechoslovakia. When Neville Chamberlain came back to London, he stood on the steps of the Prime Minister's house at 10 Downing Street, surrounded by a cheering crowd, and he said:

"We regard the agreement signed last night and the Anglo-German Naval Agreement as symbolic of the desire of our two peoples never to go to war with

one another again. My good friends, for the second time in our history, a British Prime Minister has returned from Germany bringing peace with honor. I believe it is 'peace for our time.' Go home now and get a nice quiet sleep."

And while the English slept, the Germans prepared for the invasion of Poland.

How can we find peace in a world that is at war this Christmas? I've called tonight's talk, "Christmas Peace and Joy." Let's pray.

Peace on earth is God's plan for the world. God's plan for the world is expressed in an ancient Hebrew prayer of blessing that Jews and Christians still use to encourage one another.

SLIDE – Numbers 6.24-26

Nu 6:24 “ ‘ “The LORD bless you

and keep you;

Nu 6:25 the LORD make his face shine upon you

and be gracious to you;

Nu 6:26 the LORD turn his face toward you

and give you peace.

The word translated “peace” is the Hebrew word “shalom,” a word so important to Jews that like the Hawaiians say “Aloha,” Jews use the word “shalom” for both hello and goodbye. In doing so, they are wishing upon the person they are greeting, or leaving, more than an absence of conflict with friends or enemies. The term “shalom” connotes a deep sense of satisfaction and security that results from life-giving relationships. Shalom describes the sense of well-being and wholeness people feel when all is right with the world. Shalom expresses the way things ought to be – whole, healthy, delightful, and joyful.

But the world is not generally experiencing shalom this Christmas. The late Pope John Paul II often said that we need to get to the root causes of our lack of peace and not just deal with the symptoms. When someone lacks peace we can medicate that away without really dealing with the restlessness, the unease, and the relational breaks that create the lack of peace.

What is the root problem behind the world's lack of shalom, lack of peace?

The root problem is that we human beings are unwilling to live for the glory of God. You see, in Luke 2.14, there are two related phrases.

SLIDE

Lk 2:14 “Glory to God in the highest,

and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”

Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests. Christmas cards and most little ornaments separate these as if they were two unrelated phrases. So we get cards that simply read: "Peace on Earth." And we have all these little Christmas Tree ornaments that read: "Peace on Earth." But there is no peace on earth until people start living for God and his glory.

See, the root problem behind the lack of peace is that our lives were created to revolve around God. God is the center. We human beings were designed, we were engineered to be like planets that revolve around the sun. But instead, each of us demands to be the center around which all the rest of life, including God, must revolve. We demand that other people and even God serve us, and orient their lives around us and our needs, and our wants.

If you want to understand what sin is in its essence, just circle the middle letter of the word "sin." It is an "I" problem. Or, to use a Christian term, sin is at its root a pride problem. Each of us sets ourselves up as a little god manifesting self-interest, self-love, self-centeredness, self-gratification, self-praise. We are constantly turning in upon ourselves demanding that everything revolve around us. We are the center.

Unfortunately, all of us are doing the same thing. That is where the trouble comes in. If I existed by myself, there would be no trouble but every other "I" is exactly as I am. The world is peopled by all of us little gods running around asserting ourselves, demanding our rights, claiming the same things. It is inevitable that there is going to be conflict as these gods collide with each other.

Let me bring this down to earth a little bit. Do you need a personal illustration of your own pride? Consider how restless and frustrated and unhappy you get when you don't get your way. Oh, I know we have a million reasons why our way is the best way, the wisest way, the most reasonable and sane way to do something. We offer a million defenses for our particular way of approaching something. But is it really the case, as we so fervently argue with whoever it is that we are conflicting with, is it really the case that we just want the best and the most reasonable plan to be implemented, or are we upset because our desires, and our plans are frustrated?

Which is it? Is it that the best way of approaching something is not being accomplished, or it is that our way of approaching something is not being fulfilled?

It is easy to discover which it is. Let me ask you this question: Do you find yourself tossing and turning in bed when someone else's wise, thoughtful plan is not implemented? Or just when your plan or your desires, or your will is frustrated? Be honest. Do you find yourself stewing and upset and running to everyone talking about an issue when someone else doesn't get their way, when someone else is hurt? Isn't it only when you don't get what you want, when

something you desire gets frustrated when you are hurt that you are most unhappy?

See, the root problem behind all conflict and all war is that we have all of these big “I’s” colliding into each other. We are at odds with God because he hasn’t given us what we demand, what we feel we have a right to. That is why so many of us are so far from God tonight. We say we’ve been disappointed over something. We say we struggle with our faith. But at bottom, friends, often the issue of unbelief in your life, often your doubts and your struggle with faith in God is simply rooted in this one simple fact: God has not done what you wanted him to do.

Of course, the same thing is true in many of our marital conflicts. Any of you married? Have you ever had a fight with your mate? If you haven’t, one of you is unnecessary. If you listen to people fighting, you see these two big “I’s” colliding, the collision of human pride.

- You never listen to me.
- You never meet my needs.
- Your needs? We always talk about your needs. What about my needs? I want to be listened to also. I have needs.
- Forget about your needs for a moment.
- I want you to hear me. You don’t hear me.

So we are at war – at war with God and at war with each other. How shall we find peace?

The apostle Paul said in Ephesians 2.14 concerning Jesus Christ:

SLIDE

Eph 2:14 For he himself is our peace,

He himself is our peace. Let me make a simple point this evening. Apart from us human beings having our lives revolve around God, apart from us functioning as God engineered us to function with lives revolving around God, we cannot produce peace. We can produce treaties. We can produce cease fires. We can produce settlements but we cannot produce peace.

We can’t produce a sense that things are the way they ought to be - deep satisfaction in life, deep fulfillment, a soul saturating wholeness – without God. You see, God will let people have a great many things apart from him. Even if people never look to God, God will allow folks to be successful. God will allow people to become wealthy. God will let folks be sports heroes. God will let people win Academy Awards and jet set all over the world. You do not have to have your life revolve around God to get a great tan in a tanning salon. You don’t need God to destroy your competitors in business or win an elected office

in America. God will let you have all kinds of things even if you never give God the least bit of credit, glory, or thanksgiving for your success.

There is one thing that a person can never have apart from Christ and that is peace. He is our peace. You can have success, you can have a big bank account, you can have sex, but you cannot have peace unless you get off the throne. Unless you stop demanding your own way, and you begin to live life allowing God to call the shots, permitting God to have his way, and letting God win the debates, there is no peace. He is our peace.

See, Jesus Christ came into the world for one central purpose – to make peace. Peace between God and us; peace between us and each other. The prophet Isaiah prophesied a day when this world would be governed by the Prince of Peace. This fighter for shalom would not only restore proper order to society, but he would remove the peace shattering effects of our sin by suffering in our place. In the words of Isaiah, the coming Messiah would be:

SLIDE – Isaiah 53.5-6

Isa 53:5 [The coming Messiah would be] was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us [shalom] was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

Isa 53:6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

Isaiah's prophecy, shalom, was fulfilled in the angels' announcement to the shepherds:

SLIDE

Lk 2:14 "Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

How was that peace accomplished? Peace on earth was accomplished through the death of Christ on a cross. Paul works all of this out in his magnificent letter to the Romans. The apostle Paul says that God is at war with all of us because of our unrighteousness and our ungodliness. We have violated both tablets of the Ten Commandments. We violate all of the commandments regarding God. We violate the commandments regarding each other. We don't love God the way we should and we don't love each other the way we should. God is at war with us, the apostle Paul says, because of our sins.

How can this war stop? God set forth his Son Jesus Christ to absorb his judgment upon our sins. He laid our sins upon Christ and poured out his wrath

against sin upon the Lord Jesus Christ. It is because he has done that that God can look on us now with favor and pardon and forgive us and reconcile us to himself. It is because God's wrath has been satisfied that God can now be at peace with anyone who looks to Christ in repentant faith.

That is what the apostle Paul says in Romans 5.1,

SLIDE

Ro 5:1 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,

God has ended the warfare on his side through the cross and he has ended the warfare on our side through the cross.

We present God with a list of demands. We accuse God of being unloving and unkind to us. When life doesn't go our way, we attack God. We attack God's goodness but the cross is a demonstration to us of the love of God. The cross melts our hearts. It changes us inwardly as we believe in what God has done for us in presenting his Son as the substitute for our sins.

As a result, we find ourselves disposed more and more to love God who first loved us. As we look at the cross, we find ourselves more and more willing to trust God, who gave himself up for us.

This peace won for us at the cross, the ending of the warfare on God's side, the ending of the warfare on our side, this reconciliation between God and us, results in joy for us – not only Christmas peace, but Christmas joy. Luke 2.10-11

SLIDE

Lk 2:10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

Lk 2:11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

Where there is no peace, there is no joy. We try everything in this world to make ourselves happy. We try to become more attractive. 6.5 million people had plastic surgery last year. This past year millions of weight loss books were sold. I bought one. We color our hair. We go to spas. We believe we'll be happier if we move to another city, or change jobs. We believe we'll be happier if we find a more comfortable home, or if we meet our financial goals. We believe we'll be happier if we get married, change our spouse, or have kids.

As pastor of this church for the last 18 years, I can tell you I've spoken with lots of people who have achieved their goals. They did all the things they were supposed to do to make you happy. They are financially successful. They have nice homes. They have advanced degrees. They may be married. But I can tell

you as pastor of this church for more than 18 years, who has spoken with hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people, I've talked with many folks who are desperately unhappy. Recent studies indicated that 30% of Americans, more than 75 million of us will develop clinical depression or a sustained period of unhappiness at some time in our lives. Many of those clinically depressed folks are very successful.

You may be depressed this Christmas. Many people are. For many, the holidays are the worst time of year. It brings to mind the shalom, the way the world ought to be, but isn't. Every year, more than a quarter of million Americans try to end their unhappiness by attempting suicide. 30,000 Americans succeed. Maybe you know someone who has attempted to take their own life. Perhaps you know someone who has been successful. Perhaps you or someone you know is depressed.

Joy in the Bible is related to peace. Where there is no peace – no peace with God – there is no joy.

Do you know that one of the most common experiences of people who find peace with God by turning to Christ is the experience of joy? Not only have I met hundreds of folks who tell me they are unhappy. Over the last 30 years I've met literally thousands of people who have told me that the first time in their lives that they ever felt truly happy was when Christ entered their life. They will often say something like: "Rich, the only time I feel truly happy right now is when I feel close to Christ, when I'm in fellowship with Christ's people. I felt joy when I came to Christ."

People lose peace and joy because they drift from Christ-centered lives. Maybe you are among them. Maybe you started in the direction of Jesus Christ, but you decided to take over running your own life and you don't have peace and you don't have joy. In a little while I'm going to give you an opportunity to come back to Christ this Christmas Eve.

Let me close by sharing with you a fascinating study that was done by a professor of clinical psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School. The man's name is Armand Nicholi. He wrote a book titled: *The Question Of God*. In it he compared the philosophy and life experience of the great psychiatrist Sigmund Freud with the philosophy and life experience of CS Lewis, the writer of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, which is so popular this Christmas.

Sigmund Freud lived with continual suicidal thoughts. What you find in his own personal correspondence are frequent references to depression. He used to carry cyanide pills in case at some point he wanted to take his own life. When he was 28 years old, he began using cocaine to try to feel some temporary joy but, of course, the feeling wore off. If any of you have ever been addicted, you know that you get lower after the drug wears off than you ever were before. At age 80,

near the end of his life, Freud said: "My mood is bad. Little pleases me, my self-criticism has grown more acute. I would diagnose it as senile depression in anyone else."

CS Lewis, the great Christian writer of the *The Chronicles of Narnia* and other wonderful Christian books grew up depressed and pessimistic like Sigmund Freud. Lewis' mother died when he was young. His father was cold and rejecting. Lewis attended a boarding school where the drunken headmaster used to beat him. CS Lewis mentions in his autobiography that as a child he had the gloomiest, most pessimistic anticipation of adult life.

But at the age of 30, Lewis found Christ or rather, Christ found him. Do you know how CS Lewis describes his conversion to Christ? He calls it "the discovery of joy." In his biography titled *Surprised By Joy*, Lewis talks about discovering ultimate joy in Jesus Christ. His whole outlook on life for the next 35 years changed because of the peace and joy he discovered in Christ.

Following his conversion he found really close friends for the first time in his life. He said that as a result of finding Christ, he was "taken outside of himself." That was the phrase he often used. Christ enabled him to stop being so self-centered. Christ enabled CS Lewis to live without demanding that other people revolve around him. He now had the ability, the energy, the desire to really enjoy other people without spending all of his time worrying about what they thought of him, or how he was doing, or how he felt. Christ took him "outside of himself."

Do you know how one of CS Lewis' closest friends described him? Here is a man who knew CS Lewis for 40 years. He said that after his conversion, "he was unusually cheerful. He almost took a boyish delight in life. He was great fun, extremely witty, an amusing companion, considerate, way more concerned with the welfare of his friends than with himself."

Lewis said: "Unless you have turned control of your life over to Christ, you never get to experience real life."

You see, there are only two great alternative ways of living. There are ultimately only two ways to approach life. You can take the approach of Sigmund Freud, who lived in a state of war with God. His whole life revolved around himself. Or you can take the approach of CS Lewis, who was at peace with God and whose life revolved around God. Like Freud, you can try to discover peace and joy on your own, in your self, in some bit of creation but the collective experience of all of humanity tells you, you will fail. Or like CS Lewis, you can turn to Jesus Christ tonight. You can have your life revolve around him. The testimony of hundreds sitting here will tell you that if you do this, you will find peace and joy this Christmas.

Let's pray.