

## On Earth Peace

Date: Christmas Day, 2024

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Titus 3:3-8a, Luke 2:1-20

Our theme for this Christmas is "Peace on Earth". It's taken from the song the angels sang to the shepherds that first Christmas night:

Glory to God in the highest heaven

And on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.

Peace of course is something we all long for. I'm very conscious of those who will be spending this Christmas in precarious circumstances because they live in war zones. I think of the tiny but ancient church in Gaza, brothers and sisters whose lives have been devastated, along with all Palestinians, in the seeming unending war between Israel and Hamas. Jesus himself was born into such a precarious existence. King Herod sought to eliminate the infant Jesus as a threat to his own power. The holy family became refugees, fleeing to Egypt.

But peace in the Bible is not just the absence of war. The word used in the Jewish Scriptures, what we as Christians call the Old Testament, is *Shalom*. It conveys a sense of wholeness and harmony and joy - between people, between men and women, between us and the created world, in ourselves, between us and God. For all those aspects of shalom, peace, we need the final one, peace from God. It's what the angels sing - "on earth peace to those on whom God's favour rests." We need God's favour to rest upon us to find shalom, peace.

How can we find God's favour? How can we find the shalom of Christmas? In his book, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, theologian Cornelius Plantinga describes sin as "the vandalism of shalom". God has made the world to be a place of shalom. He is for shalom. And so he is against anything that breaks shalom. We see that vandalism of shalom all over the place. We recognise our personal agency and responsibility in this. We choose to be cruel, or mean, or spiteful. Yes sometimes these are reactions to how others treat us, but we make the hole in the fabric of shalom bigger. But we also recognise that we're also enmeshed in cultures and structures that move us to destroy shalom. It's like the pirate who was born and raised as a pirate. Piracy is all he's known. Is he a victim of his circumstances or guilty of his crimes? The answer is both. He is a victim and an agent. We too are victims and agents. We participate in and perpetuate the vandalism of shalom, even as we're victims ourselves. So how can we find the shalom, the peace of Christmas?

The answer is the baby whose birth we celebrate. Jesus. The prophet Isaiah, 700 odd years before his birth, named him the Prince of Peace. When the angel appeared to the shepherds, they were terrified. To encounter God and his glory is to be exposed for who you really are. The poet T.S. Elliot wrote, “humankind cannot bear too much reality.” If we are all complicit in the vandalism of shalom, the prospect of an encounter with God is terrifying. There is a kind of atheism which refuses God because the thought of him existing is too much! But what does the angel say?

“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 Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.”

If Jesus is the Prince of Peace, then it’s in these three titles by which the angel names him that we see how he brings shalom. The Saviour. The Messiah. The Lord. This morning I wanted to explore these three titles just briefly.

First, Jesus brings peace because he is the Saviour. Part of our problem as human beings is pride. We think we can save ourselves. We can fix the problems in the world. All it takes is the right program. More resolve. Being better people. But if the reality is that we are enmeshed, that we’re victims as well as agents, thinking we can save ourselves is just part of the problem. It’s like that Simpsons episode where Homer wanders into a tar pit and says, “don’t worry, I’ll just pull out my feet with my hands, and then I’ll just pull out my hands with my face.” No, we need a saviour to rescue us, to pull us out of the muck. Jesus is the Saviour because he has come to rescue us from sin. In John’s gospel he says, “Anyone who sins is a slave to sin. ... [But] if the Son sets you free you will be free indeed.”<sup>1</sup> This is why Jesus is also called the Redeemer. To redeem something is to buy it. The image was taken from the slave market where you would redeem a slave. And so elsewhere the New Testament says that in Christ “we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.”<sup>2</sup> The one whose birth we celebrate this day, grew up to die on the cross. He saves us through his death which brings us forgiveness of sins. Through this forgiveness and rescue we find peace with God. That broken shalom is restored.

Second, Jesus brings peace, because he is the Messiah. Messiah is the Hebrew equivalent of Christ in Greek and they both mean anointed. The ancient kings of Israel, going back to great king David, were anointed with oil as a sign of them being chosen by God for their role as king. There were a great many prophecies in the Old Testament that one day God would

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<sup>1</sup> John 8.34, 36

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 1.7

send a king in David's line who would establish God's kingdom of justice and peace forever. And so again the prophet Isaiah proclaimed:

Of the greatness of his government and peace  
there will be no end.  
He will reign on David's throne  
and over his kingdom,  
establishing and upholding it  
with justice and righteousness  
from that time on and for ever.<sup>3</sup>

Now the angel announced to the shepherds that this long promised king had finally come, born this day in Bethlehem. As God's king Jesus brings shalom, because his law is one that builds peace. Jesus famously says, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God." To follow him as king is to live under his law and to follow his example of love and to share his peace. It is to be the kind of people who weave themselves into the torn fabric of this world to bring shalom, healing and wholeness. And he is the king for whom we wait who will come again to bring peace between the nations of this world and make all things new.

Finally, Jesus brings peace because he is also the Lord. The forgiveness of sins. Bringing an eternal kingdom of justice. Peace on earth. These all seem fabulously impossible. How could a baby born in Palestine 2000 years ago possibly do all these things? The answer is because this was no ordinary baby. He is the Lord. The word Lord here doesn't just mean master. It was the title the Jews used when speaking of God. 9 months earlier the angel told the astonished Mary that she would become pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. "So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God," the angel said. By calling Jesus "Lord", the angel tells us that Jesus is none other than the eternal God, maker of heaven and earth, now come in the flesh. He is the eternal Son of the Father, now born to Mary. This is the reason Jesus can bring forgiveness, a rescue from sin and death, an eternal kingdom of justice, peace on earth. No one could do this but God himself. And in Jesus God has become one of us to bring us his peace. It is as we come to Jesus that we find God's favour rests upon us.

No wonder the great host of angels sang with exultant joy that first Christmas carol:

Glory to God in the highest heaven  
And on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.

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<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 9.7

The question for you and me is what will we do with this good news of great joy, of peace found in Jesus? The shepherds show us. Like them we have heard the news and the angel's song. What do they do? They go to see this thing which has happened. Jesus says, "Seek and you will find." That is what the shepherds did. That is what we too can do today. We can seek Jesus in the pages of Scripture. We can seek Jesus in the praises of his people. We can seek him in the community of his body, the church. We can seek him in prayer. Then having found the one for whom they sought they spread the word. They told others of all that had been told about this child. It wasn't forced. It just bubbled out naturally. They couldn't keep this good news of great joy in! And they returned to their fields glorifying and praising God. They returned to the same old life, and work and place and circumstance, but they returned changed. They returned full of praise to God, such that their life became one of worship.

Friends, do you long for peace? Hear the good news of great joy. Today, a Saviour has been born. He is the Messiah, the Lord. He is the Prince of Peace. Will you seek him with the shepherds? If you've found him, will you worship him? Will you let the news of the joy and peace of his birth bubble out to those around you that they too may come and find his peace?