

# Peace for a Divided World

December 6, 2020

Various texts

This morning, we come to our 2<sup>nd</sup> of the advent series, “Jesus came for times such as these.” He came to give exactly what this world needs: Light for a dark world, peace for a divided world, healing for a diseased world, life for a dying world, salvation for a doomed world, hope for a despairing world. He came specifically, pointedly, intentionally to give these things. He came as the Savior, the One who saves. By definition, this means we are lost, hopeless, doomed, divided. And since all of these conditions seem to pop off the headlines of the news these days, I thought it would be good to see how Jesus came to give answers to these serious problems.

In other words, Jesus came as help for the hard times, not just to join the celebration of the good times. He came to heal hurts, cure diseases, stop wars, save lost and broken people. He came for times like these and people like us. He is the answer to our problems.

So, this morning the issue is peace. He came to bring peace for a divided world. I think it is safe to say that we are a divided world. We are a divided country. We are a divided state. We are a divided community. And these divisions have even brought stress inside this room this morning.

Perhaps my biggest challenge this morning is to not lead you into focusing on our divisions, kind of like Paul did before the Sanhedrin that we studied not that long ago. They all hated him, but he began his defense by highlighting the division that the assembled body had with each other and they soon started fighting each other and forgot about their hatred of Paul. It worked for him, I’m not going to try it here. So, resist the urge to focus on the divisions, the politics of our day. The truth is that the divisions exist on all levels, from religion to politics to race to gender to education to nationalities, ethnicities, localities, languages, generations, cultures, entertainment. Need I go on? There are divisions everywhere. So, don’t focus on one, there are many.

Instead, I would like to focus on what it was that Jesus brought in this regard and how that played out in His life and ministry and how it impacts our world today. I begin by highlighting our base text of the day, Luke 2:14, the announcement from the angels to the shepherds upon the birth of Jesus.

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!” He came to give us peace.

Main point: Jesus came to bring peace to people who are separated from God and separated from each other.

There, that is it. The angels were dispatched to the shepherds watching their flocks by night to announce that the Savior had been born who would bring about peace. We join in their celebration. We sing such a pronouncement with them. We cling to the truth of the pronouncement. We give thanks for the peace that He has brought to us. Truly this is the season when our focus turns to this gift of peace.

Now, before we even leave this one verse, we must notice the qualifier here, “with whom He is pleased.” Some other versions have it as “on whom His favor rests.” So, not everyone is going to enjoy, experience this peace. Only some will. And here in this fallen, fractured world, on some levels we will only experience it in part. True and complete peace will only come when we leave this world and are reunited with Christ, or perhaps for some it will come when Jesus comes back and transforms this world into the place it was intended to be with Jesus on the throne. I think of this whenever I hear a Christmas carol announce “peace on earth, good will toward men.” That is true, but not true for all.

As we see here, such peace will be experienced by those who are right with Him, with whom He is pleased. In fact, the Scriptures are clear that in some

ways, Jesus came as a divider. As Peter notes in I Peter 2, Jesus is our cornerstone, the rock on which we are built but to others He is “a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.” (I Pet.2:8) For some, the gospel is the sweetest words ever uttered to man. But for others, “the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing.” (I Cor.1:18) No, the coming of Jesus did not bring peace to all. It will be experienced only by some, by those who are His.

Next, I would like to consider what this peace actually is. I suggest that for most of us, we have the wrong concept of peace. Peace is NOT just an absence of hostilities. That may seem like peace, but it is NOT peace. After all, the gospels are clear that the Pharisees, the Jewish leaders were not at peace with Jesus. Were they? And yet, there weren't any actual hostilities until the very end. And even then, they used others to carry out their hostile intentions. So, all the time of Jesus' ministries, He was at war with the Pharisees, the Jewish leaders even though the hostilities only came out at the end.

And lest you think I am splitting hairs here, I assure you this issue is crucial. Right now, differences among people in our nation is at a fever pitch, whether political or racial or sections of the country. And yet, all of that tension exists below the surface, fermenting, building. On the surface, you could look at us and declare ourselves “one nation under God” but clearly we are not. The lack of hostilities does not mean we are at peace.

Instead, the biblical concept of peace has at its core tranquility. It is a calm state at the core, even if on the surface it does not appear that way. This is shalom. I think of Jesus in the boat with His disciples in the midst of the storm. Clearly, the situation was one of strife, tension, peril. And yet, Jesus expected His disciples to be at peace **IN THE MIDST OF THE STORM**. In other words, peace is a condition of tranquility at the core that transcends the situation at hand.

How many times in the birth narratives of Jesus do we read the words of greeting, “Peace be with you?” And we understand why. The situation called for panic, anxiety, shock. But the presence of Christ, the presence of His angels, the truth of the situation ought bring peace, not panic. This shocking event was really good news. It was intended by God to bring peace.

Can you see how that fits our current situation? If you find yourself panicking, fearful, anxious, it means you are focused on the surface conditions and not on the promises of God. What is the truth? Jesus is on the throne. Amen? He has defeated His enemy on the cross. Amen? Nothing can thwart His plan. Amen? He has promised NEVER to leave us or forsake us. Amen? He says that NOTHING can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen? He says that GREATER is He who is in you than He who is in the world. Amen? He says that we can walk through the valley of the shadow of death and yet not fear evil. Amen? He says that if we live is Christ, but if we die we gain. Amen? Why because we have Jesus, who IS our peace.

Our peace is a person. Paul writes in Ephesians 2:14, “For He Himself IS our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility.” Wow, there is a lot here. As fallen humans in a fallen and broken world, our natural state of being is war, strife, enmity as the Bible puts it. That is how each one of us is born and we show that with both God and others. None of us is born at peace with God. And even the smallest of children will fight you over their toys. Right? So, our natural state is war. It is only when we learn peace, find peace ourselves and then extend it to others that we can experience real peace. And that comes through God’s unique action of making peace.

Jesus came to endure the wrath that we deserve, coming from both God and man. As Isaiah puts it, “The Lord laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” We can experience peace with God because Jesus MADE our peace. He stood between two warring parties and endured the wrath of both sides. He was THE peacemaker.

But not only was this true on a level between God and man, it was also true between men. He made peace among men. Think about this: when Jesus was born, was it a peaceable situation? Well, as God would have it, Joseph and Mary were forced to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem so a census could be taken so the Roman government could know how much tax money to expect. Do you suppose the people were happy about that?

Joan has been teaching about the Jewish festivals and so we were talking about the pilgrimage journey to Jerusalem to celebrate the feasts. Along the way, these pilgrims would sing the psalms of ascent found in Psalms 120-140 or so. They would travel collectively singing praise. So, as Joseph and Mary were in the caravan traveling to be taxed, do you think they were singing these psalms of ascent? I know I would have been ticked off. I would have been seething under my breath about the tyranny of the Roman government. And yet, by the end of the book of Acts, what do we see? The gospel had come to Rome and many in Caesar's household had become believers. The New Testament Church had a whole bunch of Roman believers! Unbelievable.

Or, how about the Jewish officials of the day? What was King Herod's attitude toward the baby born as the Jewish Messiah? Did he really want to find out where the baby was so he could come and worship Him? No, Herod hunted Jesus down, killing a whole host of baby boys to make sure this messianic baby was killed too. So, Jesus was born at a time and place where There was enmity with Roman officials, Jewish officials, religious officials, city dwellers, even among his relatives, the list goes on and on. His people were at odds with everyone around Him. And yet, the Church would only a few short years later contain people from all of these groups. Jewish believers and Gentile believers would share meals together. No, you don't understand: Jewish believers and Gentile believers would share meals together! This is a big deal. They could find peace through their shared relationship with Jesus. Jesus was at the center. It is no coincidence that the scene in heaven is described as people from every tribe, tongue, and nation. Jesus came to bring peace.

So did such people get to that place of peace by giving up all of their distinctives? Did the Jews quit being Jewish? Did the Gentiles become Jews? Did all of the believers from throughout the Roman empire move to a new land and build a commune? No. The Assyrians and Babylonians tried that technique of conquering and sending the conquered people into exile to be forced to live as their conquerors. How well did that work? Read about it in the book of Daniel.

No, the warring did not stop because they all gave up their identities. Jews were still Jews, Romans were still Roman. Instead, what changed was the priority of such distinctions. There was something more important, more to the

core of who they were than their ethnicity, their nationality, their spiritual heritage, their gender, their cultural status. We see that spelled out by Paul in Galatians 3. There in vv. 27-28 we read, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Now, clearly there were still males and females, freemen and slaves, Jews and Greeks. It is not that these distinctions no longer existed. It is that such distinctions were not nearly as important as it was whether you were a Christian or not. Your identity in Christ superseded your other identities. You were at peace with your differences because you knew such things really didn’t matter.

Or, do you remember what happened on the Day of Pentecost after Jesus had ascended into heaven? The text tells us that those who were gathered in Jerusalem that day, that feasting day from all over the Roman world, EACH HEARD THE WORD PREACHED IN THEIR OWN

LANGUAGE. Did you catch that? The ministry of the Spirit was to speak through Peter and the other disciples in the specific dialogues of those present. These gathered Jews from all over were united by the Holy Spirit to hear the word of the gospel of Jesus in their own language. In other words, they didn’t have to learn Greek, learn Hebrew or Aramaic. The Spirit was translating for them. The Spirit was bringing unity where there was division. The gospel of Jesus was bringing peace.

Now, since we have just completed our study of the book of Acts, does this mean the young church never had conflict? Did the early church all get along at all times? Of course not. They had conflict at such a level that people died, God struck them down. How about the ministry teams? Did they ever have conflict? Of course they did, Paul and Barnabas parted ways over the inclusion of John Mark. Did the Jewish believers and Gentile believers always get along? No, they fought over things major and things minor. They had to institute a whole level of leadership structure just to keep the peace. Did they have to do things that they did not need to do nor want to do just to keep the peace? Of course they did. Paul completed a ritualistic time of cleansing just to please the believers from Jewish heritage.

I could go on and on, but I think I've made my point. Finding peace among men in a fallen world filled with flawed believers is not automatic, it is not easy, and sometimes it is not fun. But we do it because we know there is something more important than that which divides us. We have Jesus who unites us. We have a gospel mission that compels us. We have an identity that supersedes any other identity that we have.

And, we have a Spirit that unites. As Paul writes in Ephesians 4:4-7,

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. 7 But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

Did you notice all of the “one's?” I think there is a message here. God's intention is that the Church, the gospel, the faith, the Spirit unite. It is all meant to bring peace to warring parties. And yet, did you also notice that the Spirit's charge is to give gifts as He sees fit? He gives some things to this one and some other things to that one. In other words, God's plan for making peace was not to make us all the same. We are designed to be different. Therefore, if we are designed to be different, there will always be ample opportunity for us to experience strife. Indeed, that is a repeated theme in the book of I Corinthians. I think of the issue over who baptized. I think of the fighting over how communion was celebrated. I think especially about the distribution of spiritual gifts. There Paul reminds us that our Spirit-given gift does not signify our status. There is no place for gloating over the gift you have been given or complaining that no one else shares your gift. Indeed, the instruction is given that we are to esteem those members whose gifts might be deemed less desirable. We are not to envy others for their gift or seek to obtain such gifts for ourselves. They are the Spirit's gifts, given as He sees fit for the purposes of God's kingdom. Are you catching the point? We find peace when we keep our

focus on what is truly important and not give importance to things that are not or are out of our control.

Or how about Paul, and how he approached this prioritizing of lifestyles or liberties? Did he refuse to associate with those who were different from him? Did he separate himself from those he didn't like? No, for the sake of the gospel he became "all things to all men that he might win some." There it is. The priority of the advancement of the Kingdom became his priority. He was willing to live as a Jew among Jews. He wasn't going to fight with them over religious liberty. He was willing to live like the Romans when in Rome...for the sake of the gospel.

Jesus came announcing peace, He declared time and again, "Do not be afraid, it is I," or "Peace be with you," or as in John 14:27, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." This was His mission, this was His purpose. He Himself IS our peace. And yet, we must not think of it in terms of the world's understanding of peace.

Indeed, the peace of Christ will sometimes be at odds with the world's understanding of peace. We will stand against keeping the peace when the purposes of the kingdom call for it. We will not always be satisfied to keep things calm, get along to get along sort of thinking. Why? Because there are people who are in desperate need of Jesus and it might just be offensive to some that we declare that truth.

But it does also mean that we will seek to live at peace with all men and especially among the household of faith. The church down the street is not our enemy, even if we disagree with them. The government is not our enemy and we are called to submit to them, even if we do not agree with them. My wife is not my enemy, even if she doesn't agree that I am right!

Yes, we are called to have the attitude of Jesus, who thought more highly of others than He did Himself, emptying Himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, horrible death...for the sake of the cause. He came to bring

peace. He is our peacemaker. And for that we celebrate Him on this day as we prepare to celebrate His birth. Amen?

If we believe that this is what the Word of God teaches, then what should be different about our lives?

- 1) We will remember who we are at our core.
- 2) We will keep all other issues in perspective.
- 3) We will prioritize the values and mission of the Kingdom.
- 4) We will seek to be peacemakers.
- 5) We will know that true peace can only come through Jesus.
- 6) We will celebrate our Lord Jesus who came to bring peace.