

***Advent Series: The Four Love Stories of Christmas***  
***Part IV: Peace on Earth***  
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**December 24, 2018**

*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 that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, 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 heaven,  
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”*

*When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. -- Luke 2:8-20, NIV*

This is the time of year when some churches put on live nativity scenes. Have you ever been to one of those? If so, maybe you can relate to this: Not too long ago, I read a newspaper article called “Awry In a Manger: It Takes a Miracle to Stage This Play.” It was about how different churches faired putting on these nativity scenes.

For example, the Fellowship Bible Church in Mount Laurel, New Jersey put on its own living nativity. At one point the donkey hauling the Virgin Mary was spooked, and it bucked Mary off its back and then bolted. This prompted Joseph to jump on the donkey’s hindquarters, but he fell off and got caught in the donkey’s reins. The donkey just kept going -- dragging Joseph several hundred feet before it finally stopped. They quit having that scene with the live donkey because, as the pastor said, “We gave up trying to tame the donkey.” In Fort Walton Beach, Florida, a cow in the First Baptist Church nativity scene escaped. The cow wandered around downtown for an hour until police could corral it. At the First United Methodist Church in Tuckerton, New Jersey, the camel noticed that the thatched roof on top of the stable was edible and proceeded to eat the roof off of the stable. (*The Wall Street Journal*, “Awry In a Manger: It Takes a Miracle to Stage This Play,” 12/18/2007, A1) Maybe the chaos of these living nativity scenes reminds us of our lives. We try to bring some “peace on earth” but it doesn’t always go the way we had planned. It seems like there is always some donkey running off or some camel eating the roof off of our plans, and the result is not peace on earth, but utter chaos. Anyone ever felt that way before? But I think we are all looking for a little “peace on earth.”

This longing may be reflected in another newspaper headline I saw a few days ago that said this: “Inner Peace Is a Booming Business.” (*The Wall Street Journal*, December 17, 2018, A17) The article talked about how much money was being spent by those seeking inner peace and happiness – trying things like attending a one-week retreat in a ranch in Malibu that begins at \$7,800 per person! Just a few pages before that, I came across another news article with this title: “Headspace vs. Calm: The Meditation Battle That’s Anything but Zen.” This article was about the battle between two companies with apps trying to dominate what is called the “meditation industry” that is worth an estimated \$1.2 billion!

Tonight, we are looking at our final message in our series “The Four Love Stories of Christmas.” Each story has focused on a different aspect of love – from God’s love that will bring hope for the world, to the joy of friendship as seen between Mary the mother of Jesus and her cousin Elizabeth, to the love that came down to earth in Jesus. Tonight’s message focuses on what happened soon after Jesus was born in a manger. This good news is proclaimed by one angel at first, and a host of angels next -- not only that the savior of the world has been born in a manger, but that he will be the One who will bring “peace on earth.”

In one sense, we are like those shepherds who first heard this message. They were not present for the birth itself. They were told this good news later. Tonight, we are also hearing the good news from a distance of place and time. When it was first proclaimed by those angels, it was real news as in new information that they did not have before: God has fulfilled God’s plan to send this child to be born -- a child who is fully human and fully divine. This child will be the savior of the world and a new king or ruler with a new kind of kingdom – a kingdom of “peace on earth.”

So, what does this “peace on earth” look like? Is it just one thing -- like the end of some type of conflict, or does it have more than one expression? How do we find this peace in our lives and in our world today? Those are some of the questions we may want to know. When it comes to peace on earth, perhaps it can be summed up in this way: *Peace on earth begins with peace with God and leads to peace within and peace with others.*

However we define “peace on earth” -- this story shows *us that the love of God begins with peace with God.* It is this peace we are given by God as believers that focuses on *our relationship with God.* Now some of us may want to say, “I never knew I was *at war* with God.” However, God was never “at war” with us -- either because God was mad or out to get us. But, as human beings, we tend to grow up focused on ourselves. Some of that self-centeredness is developmental, as those such as Piaget might tell us. But, at some point, it is important for us to realize that life is not *all* about *us* and *our* wants. God’s plan is to move us out of being *totally* self-focused to being focused on God and focused on others.

One of our Presbyterian church’s catechisms begins by asking, “What is the chief end of humankind?” The answer? “To know God and to enjoy God forever.” The purpose of life is about *connecting* with God – in other words, finding *peace with God.* It is not *all* about us. And Jesus comes to bring *that* kind of peace into our lives. That is why Jesus is born as God in the flesh – in order to reconcile us to God. God isn’t “out to get us.” Actually, God reaches *out* to be in relationship with us. What God wants to give us is this peace with God. And that is where

genuine peace begins. Paul writes about this later in one of his letters and puts it this way: “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,” (Romans 5:1, NIV)

This peace with God leads to what we might call “peace within.” It is a calmness and a purpose in our lives. It is centeredness that comes from within, not from without. Author Ann Morrow Lindbergh describes it this way:

I want first of all ... to be at peace with myself. I want a singleness of eye, a purity of intention, a central core to my life that will enable me to carry out these obligations and activities as well as I can. I want, in fact – to borrow the language of the saints – to live “in grace” as much of the time as possible. . . . By grace I mean an inner harmony, essentially spiritual, which can be translated into outward harmony. (From *Gift From the Sea*)

Today, there seems to be a renewed interest in *spirituality*. It seems to be okay to be “spiritual,” but *not* necessarily “religious.” And being spiritual can mean a range of things – from wanting to have a faith that is alive and dynamic, to not wanting to have anything to do with religion that is organized or has any historical ties. The problem is that we can’t have a complete spirituality without God. If God is the source of our peace, then we can’t have peace without God – who is the Source. Or, as one person put it, “Our trouble is we want peace without the Prince.” (Addison Leitch, *Christianity Today*, Vol. 38, No. 14.) But without the source, we can’t find that ultimate, complete peace within.

I see this peace within, not as the absence of pain and conflict, but as the presence of a calmness at the core of our being that is often present in spite of what is going on all around us. I have even seen it in persons who seem to be facing all kinds of difficulties – sickness, family troubles, loss of work, even death – and yet there is sometimes an inner calm in the midst of the storm. In the middle of the hurricanes of life, there is an “eye in the storm” that somehow manages to stay calm. And most of the folks who experience that will tell you they really do not know how that happens – it is truly a gift of God’s grace. Again, Paul describes this peace in one of his letters saying: “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7, NIV)

This “peace within” leads to *peace with others*. I think Paul is writing about this kind of peace in his letter to the Romans when he says, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” (Romans 12:18, NIV) Peace with others is something that we often have to work on. Most of us would probably like peace to be “sprinkled” over our lives and our relationships, like magical fairy dust. Sometimes peace with others may even feel that way – as a gift and pure grace that we have no idea how it has come about. But other times, the peace that God gives us is more like one of those gifts we get at Christmas that has written in small print on the box “some assembly required.”

I used to love to make model ships and planes when I was a kid, but they did not come fully assembled. I might get one as a gift for Christmas, but I had to take the directions, get some glue, and spend time putting the parts together. Now, would it have been better to just get the

model fully assembled in a box? I don't think so -- because *part of the gift was the opportunity to learn how to put it together.*

Friends, I think the gift of peace with others is often the kind of gift in which there is "some assembly required." God gives us the capacity and the opportunity to work out our relationships with others, but we have to do the work! It takes work such as listening and forgiving to make that kind of peace. Yet, when we are finished, it is something that has meaning -- not only because the relationship is repaired, but also because of the work we put into it to make that peace!

This brings us full circle to where we started with peace on earth. Maybe we want to call it "world peace." To even use the term "world peace" feels like something of a joke. If you remember the movie *Miss Congeniality* starring Sandra Bullock, you know that she is an undercover police officer who has to compete in a beauty pageant in order to solve her case. So, when it comes time for her to be interviewed on stage about what she would most like to see happen in the world -- she actually begins by telling the truth and giving an honest and long answer. But, when everyone looks stunned, she finishes up by adding the requisite, ". . . and world peace!" And everyone applauds! It seems like such a cliché, mainly because everyone wants it, but no one seems to be able to make it! However, this good news of the birth of Christ points to the coming of real peace in our world and the hope that can bring.

It was Christmas 1863. The country was deeply divided by civil war. The great American poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, was sitting in his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He listened in despair to the bells of a nearby church. He had recently lost his wife who was badly burned in a fire in which he himself had been severely burned trying to save her. He also grieved for his country. And he worried about his son, a young Army lieutenant who had been wounded in battle. "There is no peace on earth," he wrote, "For hate is strong, and mocks the song / Of Peace on earth, good will to men." But as he penned the words that became the poem and the carol "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day," he found a new sound and a new hope in the bells: "Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: / 'God is not dead; nor doth He sleep! / The wrong shall fail, the right prevail, / With Peace on earth, good will to men!'" (*Guideposts Magazine*, December 1988, p. 28-29.)

Friends, I believe that sooner or later, God's gift of peace *will* find its way into our lives and our world. And when it does, find a way to be a peacemaker in your part of the world and you will be blessed, and you will be a blessing to others! If we look back to the story of the shepherds and the angels, notice how the different people in the story respond in different ways to this good news. It says that the shepherds heard the good news the angels spoke, and they had to go to Bethlehem to check out this amazing event for themselves. Once they had seen that it was true, they began spreading the word and sharing the good news with others. Then, when the "others" heard this good news, it says that they, too, were "amazed." Finally, it tells us that the shepherds went back to their homes praising and glorifying God. They went back home to their lives, but they had been transformed by this good news. And then there was Mary, the mother of Jesus who "treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." (Luke 2:19, NIV) Mary responded in a more reflective way, perhaps wondering what all of this meant -- not only for her and this new child, but even for the whole world.

So, how will you respond to this good news you have heard tonight? Will you let it transform you? Will you reflect deeply -- pondering and perhaps even treasuring its meaning for you and for the world? Will you share the good news in your own way with others who also need to know God's love?

This past week, Priscilla Horne, the Director of our Preschool, shared with me a letter she happened to come across written by her father nearly sixty years ago to his co-workers. Listen to how he chose to respond to the good news of the birth of Christ:

Dear Fellow Employees:

Christmas is a Happy Time.

It commemorates the birth of the Christ Child, who came amongst us when the world was troubled; its people were confused; and faith and love were at a low ebb.

The world has improved since the Three Wise Men sought out The Little One, who was destined to be the Savior of mankind. Still...there remains too much unhappiness, distrust, and discontent.

The Spirit of Christmas does, however, tend to bring us closer together. It prompts us to think of others; it affords us an opportunity to reflect on the blessing we enjoy and the friendships we cherish.

This spirit CAN dwell in the hearts of us all each day...and, so, throughout the year, We will then have taken a long step in the direction of Brotherly Love, Peace on Earth, Good Will to All Men. That this will come to pass must be our aim and prayer.

Wishing you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Sincerely,

J. R. Lientz

Vice President

Friends, whatever you choose to do, and however you chose to respond, know this: God can and will use you to bring peace on earth.

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.