

Sermon – December 8, 2019
The Cast of Christmas – Peace
Crown of Life Lutheran Church, Rigby, ID
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Today we will experience the joyful proclamation of the angels. And there is probably no better topic to discuss during this holiday season than today's topic of PEACE.

We all seem to maintain a hectic pace in this holiday season. Then, when this season is over, we feel exhausted. So much to do ... so little time ... so many people to help. We never seem to get ahead of our daily schedules.

So today, I thought we would talk about peace, and see if we can come away with a greater understanding of peace, and how it can touch our lives in a more positive and dramatic way.

We will talk about Proclaiming Peace, Passing the Peace, a Deeper Peace, and finally, Being Peaceful. Let's begin with the visual of the angels proclaiming peace ... so long ago by...

Proclaiming Peace

Much of the world takes a moment to pause for Christmas as we heard during the JOY-A Jefferson County Christmas Celebration held here last December. We heard about the Christmas traditions from many, many different countries.

I suspect that even though many people celebrate Christmas, they really don't know WHY.

When we look at the first proclamation of Christmas that came from heaven to earth through the voices of angels speaking to the shepherds, we are reminded of the "WHY" behind all the things we are doing during this season...

"A great company of the heavenly host appeared, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests'" (Luke 2:13-14).

Earlier in our Gospel lesson, one angel explained the good news that will cause great joy for all people this way ... by simply announcing ... "the Messiah has been born in Bethlehem."

The Messiah, the Christ, the Savior that people had been waiting for thousands of years is now here ... in the form of a baby ... which is just another dramatic example of how God works in such unusual ways in order to get and keep our attention.

It is IMPORTANT to understand that the peace the angels proclaimed was not a proclamation of world peace, or a declaration of the end of strife and war.

It was not a direct announcement that we can now get along with our neighbors. It's actually MUCH BIGGER and much MORE IMPORTANT than any of that.

Through Jesus, the barrier of sin has been removed. NOW through Jesus, we have a relationship and peace with God. The peace on earth Jesus brings is foremost the peace that we can have with God through Christ.

This peace comes from faith in Jesus, and the forgiveness that follows. Because of the

forgiveness of sins, we have peace with God. No wonder the angels proclaimed, "Glory to God in the highest!"

The angels declared that this peace belongs to "those on whom God's favor rests", which is a description of His children ... those who believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Because Jesus brought us peace with God, one of the greatest responses we can have to the amazing news is to become peace proclaimers in all our Christmas traditions, preparations, and celebrations.

The truth is, most families experience some relational pressure and difficulties during this season. Nearly every family gathering has at least one relative who requires extra grace. For many families, Advent and Christmas actually bring MORE strife and conflict ... rather than LESS.

As the ones who have received peace with God through Jesus, we have a special opportunity to proclaim peace in our families in a similar way to how the angels proclaimed peace to us.

In Matthew 5:9, Jesus tells us, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." This passage shows us that those who count themselves to be children of God join Him in the work of proclaiming His peace and making peace with others. Perhaps we should call this Passing the Peace.

But we also need to recognize that PEACEMAKING is not the same thing as PEACEKEEPING.

When Jesus brought us peace with God, He didn't create an uneasy truce; He brought us back into unity and harmony with God.

Jesus didn't tolerate us; He restored us. He didn't make a way to endure being with us; He made a way to be near to us and develop a love relationship with us.

Peacemaking goes much deeper. Peacemaking is what God did for us through sending Jesus. Peacemaking restores relationship. It brings harmony.

It goes beyond just avoiding and separating conflict and brings restoration, relationship, and unity. Jesus made lasting and restorative peace between us and God. Aren't you glad the angels didn't proclaim, "And on earth tolerance to those whom He decided to endure"?

Aren't you glad the angels didn't proclaim, "And on earth God puts up with those on whom His favor rests"? Instead, He brought a true peace with God.

For many of us, the Christmas season is a reminder of the lack of peace we have in our families and our lives. Many of us have conflicts with family members, where we just want to survive the holidays without the same old fight and antics that we experience every year.

Many of us may struggle to keep it together and try to cling to whatever peace we can hold onto in our own hearts until it's over.

But I can share with you today, there's more for you THAN THAT this Christmas season. As a person brought to God through Jesus's birth, death, and resurrection, you don't have to be a PEACEKEEPER who has to try to survive the holidays.

Instead, you can proclaim the good news of Jesus by being a PEACEMAKER who lives, brings, and proclaims a peace that transforms and lasts.

For example, if you decide that the only way Christmas can be a success is by getting everyone what they want even though you can't afford it, you are not proclaiming peace in your life and the lives of others. You are guaranteeing stress, guilt, and dissatisfaction in your heart.

You are fostering entitlement in the lives of your loved ones. That's a gift that just keeps on TAKING, because the more entitled someone feels, the more they demand. You'll get to reap the payments and interest on those gifts for months to come. You'll get to live the stress of Christmas all year long from the choices you make right now.

Contrast that with sitting down with your family and helping them understand what you really want Christmas to look like, and giving them realistic expectations. If your children or family can only be happy if they get everything they want, maybe you will be doing them a favor by disappointing them.

Here is one small example that demonstrates the difference between peacekeeping and peacemaking. Peacekeeping tries to appease, patch together, and keep everyone satisfied or just quietly disgruntled.

While Peacemaking deals with the underlying issues and brings healing and restoration. That's what God's Son did for us. What better way to proclaim and demonstrate what He's done than to do the same in our families? (pause)

One of the dangers of this season is getting so caught up in our traditions and so wrapped up in trying to create the idyllic holiday that we forget our real mission. James reminds us...

"But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness." James 3:17-18

This season we should be more concerned with proclaiming the peace of Jesus. We should be centered on living out the Gospel with our friends and family. We will all make connections and have conversations with people that only come around during this season. We should be striving for a Deeper Peace.

Now is the time to pray for wisdom in those connections. Now is the time to consider how we can proclaim Christ through what we say and how we act. Now is the time to be wise as James describes it ... "...to be pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial, and sincere."

This season I am praying that God will give me the wisdom of heaven as I interact with my family and the community.

I am praying that God will show me how to best proclaim the good news of Jesus by showing me when I should speak, and when I should let things go. I have learned that just because you're right doesn't mean you're being righteous.

Some family members and friends know how to bait us into unproductive arguments, or maybe

even sabotage the holidays through their propensity for drama. It is like a shiny fishing lure that is dangled in front of me every Christmas.

You want to argue. You want to correct. You want to fight and defend. But it seems like every time you take the bait, rather than changing their minds, you find it just drags you along to places you don't really want to go, and into conversations you don't really want to have.

Sometimes we need to say the hard thing. Sometimes the loving thing is to stand up for what is true. Other times, the righteous thing to do is to lay down our need to be right.

The loving thing is to avoid taking the bait and getting distracted from the real mission of proclaiming Jesus, and sharing the love of God with everyone and anyone who is ready and willing to receive it.

That is why a peace proclaimer needs the wisdom of heaven.

I am praying that this year that we all can proclaim His peace to our families and friends like we've never done before. Sometimes people want understanding and help. Sometimes they just want to hide behind an argument.

I pray that God will give us the wisdom and discernment to see the difference, and not take the bait.

If you typically have relational struggles during this season, remember that most people aren't born annoying, rude, opinionated, and cruel. Despite how he acts, even your cousin Eddie was made in God's image.

Remember that people become annoying, rude, opinionated, and angry because of what this world throws at them and how they choose to respond to it. The one thing we all share is brokenness. The one thing we all need is God's grace.

A peacemaker who is working to proclaim Jesus will try to get beyond the rough exterior. A peacemaker will show mercy, remembering that even more than our opinions, everyone ultimately needs Jesus.

I've never yet argued a person into relationship with Jesus, but I have loved a number of them into the kingdom of God. Certainly, love is tough.

But sometimes love is quiet and just listens. In the midst of all the traditions, celebrations, and connections this season, don't forget how precious people are to God.

Even the most belligerent, difficult, and draining people are precious to God - so much so that Jesus came to earth so that THEY could also have peace with God.

But before you proclaim peace, you first need to possess it. No one expects you to be perfect. However, it's difficult to proclaim the message of God's peace when we're stressed out, overwhelmed, and exhausted.

Our proclamation must first begin with us accepting and embracing the peace we have in God. What a rare individual it is who knows what it's like to be fully accepted for who they are ... just as they are.

Yet, that is our very condition simply because, in Jesus, God's favor now rests on us. Isn't that the very definition of Being Peaceful?

Despite all the talk of peace and grace in Christian circles, how few of us feel like we can just receive the love of God rather than needing to work for it, or prove our worthiness of it.

In the angels' proclamation, we find nothing of our own effort to obtain peace with God - only the grace of God. We didn't reach our Savior by going up to Him; rather, in Luke 2:11, the angel says, "A Savior has been born to you."

We didn't earn His favor; His favor rests on us only because we accept it by putting our faith in the cross. In order to better proclaim the peace God brings to others this season, I encourage you to guard your own peace as well.

In order to walk and remain in the peace Jesus brings, we need to be disciplined in where we allow our minds to go and the things we allow ourselves to think about. A pastor once told me "Think about what you think about."

Scripture tells us to do no less than that in 2 Corinthians 10:5, "We take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."

When it comes to living in peace and proclaiming peace, it's possible to lose the battle in our mind before our interaction with others has even begun. Have you ever had a fight or disagreement with a relative or friend that took place completely in your mind?

If you are trying to win your arguments before they even get started, how can you possibly hope to bring and proclaim peace when you spend actual time together? Granted, sometimes we need to prepare our hearts and minds for interactions that are sure to be challenging.

However, rather than preparing to defend ourselves or fight, perhaps our thoughts should prayerfully center on how we could do it differently this time.

To paraphrase and apply Hosea 8:7 to this issue, "Sow the wind in your mind, and you will reap the whirlwind in your relationships." Peace proclaimers use wisdom and patience instead of jumping to conclusions or quickly misinterpreting other people's actions or intents.

Peace proclaimers refuse to take offense when they feel slighted. They refuse to allow their own thoughts to turn a careless or insensitive comment into a personal attack.

Peace proclaimers won't give themselves over to a rumor or pick up an offense that is based on one side of the story or another person's retelling of the story. Peace proclaimers always hope, always believe, and always endure!

When he was sixty-three, Alvin got in a disagreement with his brother, Henry. Separated by 240 miles, the two never spoke for ten years.

Then, Henry had a stroke. When Alvin heard the news, he decided it was time to reunite with his brother before it became impossible to do so. By then, Alvin's sight was too poor for him to get a driver's license. So, Alvin loaded up a trailer with gasoline, camping gear, and food.

He hooked the trailer to the back of a riding lawn mower and set off to see Henry. At a top speed of five miles per hour, it took Alvin six weeks to make the 240-mile journey from Iowa to Wisconsin in order to make peace with his brother. One month later, Henry recovered from his stroke, and actually moved back to Iowa to be closer to his whole family.

We all know that you can't make anyone change. You can't make anyone do much of anything. But you can proclaim peace.

How far are you willing to go to share the peace you have in Jesus with the people you know? Are you willing to take the first step? Are you willing to take a stand this Christmas for peacemaking?

Alvin went 240 miles over six weeks to be a peacemaker, and his relationship was restored. Jesus crossed the chasm of heaven to make peace with you.

The angels came to earth to proclaim the news of "peace on earth to those on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14). In the midst of all our traditions, celebrations, and even obligations, will we put in the same effort?

Will our lives make the same proclamation? I pray so ... Amen