

Sermon – December 6, 2020
“Finding Peace in Our Struggles”
Crown of Life Lutheran Church, Rigby, ID
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Grace, mercy and peace be to each of you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

“Heavenly Father, we thank you for this day and for the transforming presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Let your grace and peace be with us during this Advent season as we wait and prepare again for the celebration of Jesus’ first coming ... His birth. We ask this in His precious name. Amen

Christmas is kind of a big deal in Finland. And there’s a great tradition there that happens every year. In fact, it has happened almost every year since the 1300s. That’s a serious tradition, going on for more than 700 years. It’s called the Declaration of Christmas Peace.

Each year at noon on Christmas Eve, the Christmas Peace is declared in the city of Turku. The proclamation is read, usually by a city official, from the balcony of a historic mansion at the center of town in the Old Great Square. It’s broadcast on the radio and television and, of course, now it is streamed live over the internet. The declaration is read out loud to remind people that Christmas peace has begun, to advise people to spend the festive period in harmony, to threaten offenders with harsh punishments, and to wish all a merry Christmas.”

Apparently, you’d better not mess with the Finns’ Christmas peace, or you will be dealt with harshly. What a great way to usher in Christmas, with a reminder of Christ’s coming and the peace He brings into the world!

If you’ve been journeying with us this past week toward Christmas, you know that we have been celebrating Advent. As a quick recap, the word Advent means “coming” or “arrival,” and the season is marked by expectation and anticipation. Advent is not just an extension of Christmas—it is a season that links the past, present, and future.

Each week, we will focus on a different attribute of God represented in the coming of Jesus: HOPE, PEACE, JOY, and LOVE.

Each of these traits leads us into a rediscovery of Christmas, and we are glad you’re here today with us to rediscover PEACE.

We are also looking at different characters in the biblical Christmas story, and seeing how they encountered the arrival of Jesus in the world.

The Shepherds: Peace Restored

When we think of peace embodied in the Christmas story, we can't help but think of the shepherds. They were the unlikely recipients of God's message of peace.

Our Gospel lesson today was Luke's account of the shepherd's role in the Christmas story. And there is so much packed in those few verses.

To begin, this is God's birth announcement to the world. And what a way to announce a long-awaited event that happened in such an unexpected way.

Suddenly in the middle of a dark and ordinary night in the Bethlehem countryside, an angel appears in the sky and is then joined by a sky full of angels. The New Living Translation calls them "the armies of heaven," and it's hard to imagine just how magnificent and bright and terrifying and glorious a sight this must have been.

And then, how about the sound? All together these incredible angels are praising God, probably singing, and declaring glory to God in heaven and peace on earth to humanity. What language, or languages, were they speaking and singing? What kind of melody and harmony? How loud must it have been, or could anyone else hear it?

Of course, you would expect the audience for this grand announcement and amazing angelic show would be the most important VIPs, the rich and famous and powerful, the kings and queens and movers and shakers of the world, right?

But that was not the case. Instead, God chose some shepherds to be the audience. Those completely ordinary, average-Joe, night shift-working animal tenders, who are the unlikely, unexpected recipients of this message of peace, wholeness, and God's favor. It's yet another scene in how God is perfectly flipping the script on what we would expect and plan and do, if it were up to us to save the world.

But the whole experience certainly leaves us asking, "Why shepherds? Why these completely unexpecting and unassuming guys?"

Maybe it's because the shepherds actually tie many biblical threads together.

First, the shepherds remind us that the patriarchs of Israel were shepherds and nomadic animal tenders, roaming ranchers of the ancient world. Abraham was the original recipient of God's covenant that He would bless all nations of the world. And this promise was carried on through Abraham's ancestors Isaac, Jacob, and beyond. King David, Israel's greatest king, was first a shepherd as well.

But more importantly, the shepherds were the “everyman”. They were nothing special. They had no entitlement. No pride or arrogance. No religious bloating.

They fit right into this process of introducing God’s Messiah: a humble carpenter and a peasant girl as parents for the Son of God, a birth in a lowly stable surrounded by animals, rough and rugged shepherds out in the fields on the edge of the more refined civilization.

These were the have-nots, examples of God raising and using the humble, and turning the world as we know it on its head. Those considered by society to be the “most holy” were not given a place in the stable to kneel on holy ground and witness the arrival of the Messiah.

These shepherds also signify Jesus’s future ministry and teaching. Sheep might have been lowly animals, but they were very special animals in Jewish culture. The Passover lamb was the sacrifice an ancient Jew would make during the most important holiday.

Its blood in a sacrifice was the atonement for a person’s sins, the cost that had to be paid to restore a person with God.

And each time it was done, this sacrifice was a reminder of the original Passover and God’s rescue and exodus of His people from Egypt.

You and I know that Jesus was entering our world to fulfill His identity as the Lamb of God, who came to take away the sin of the world.

He was the ultimate sacrifice and payment for our sins. In fact, His death did away with the need for these sacrificial lambs.

His resurrection made it possible for us to be fully restored in our relationship with God.

His life made it possible to experience true peace, shalom in the Hebrew language and culture, the word and concept that encapsulates the completeness of God’s original creation.

It’s probably partly for all of these reasons that God sent His angelic messengers to announce the birth of His Son to shepherds.

It certainly reminds us that God’s favor is not based on human standards. His favor is on all those who humbly acknowledge their brokenness, and accept the

gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love that Jesus brings.

Peace is not based on class or position or occupation, but on God's purpose and design to bring good news that will cause great joy for all the people.

I think the shepherds also lead us into several insights about our own involvement with God's peace.

Peace comes in the midst of our storms.

Have you ever experienced a hurricane? I had an opportunity in my younger years to actually fly into the center of a hurricane in a weather data collecting plane ... a C-47.

I was surprised to discover a stillness right at the center of the melee. There, the winds were calm. The rains ceased. But it was only a pause in the maelstrom. It didn't last, since those winds started howling again as we exited. It reminded me of peace in the midst of our life storms.

Let me ask you, how is your Christmas season going? If we are honest, we might choose words like busy, hectic, or frantic to describe our lives this time of year—or maybe all year round.

Maybe it's an overloaded schedule that robs you of peace. Or maybe it's something more ... relational conflict, pressure at work, a lost job, illness. You name it. We seem to have plenty of options to choose from this year.

For many of us, peace sounds like a long way off. A good idea. A nice thought for the holidays. Perhaps something we long for.

If this is where you find yourself today, let me encourage you that Jesus shows up when the storms of life threaten our peace and hope and joy. He is there with us when love seems lost and the way forward is totally unclear.

This is exactly when God appears. This is where the Christ child is born. This is where the angels show up. He shows up in the middle of Israel's Roman oppression, and centuries of suffering, when they were wondering, "Where is God?"

In the middle of a world turned upside down for a young Jewish couple who have found themselves at the center of cosmic events ... while at the same time trying to navigate the normal life realities of paying their dues by traveling by foot across the country to be counted by the government.

And having to experience childbirth for the first time far from home without the support and care of the women and midwives who would have guided Mary through this painful process. And then being first-time parents, not only with the joys and wonder and fear and responsibility of having their first son, but God's Son. I suspect all you parents out there know what that was like?

In all these circumstances, in all these struggles—this is where God showed up. And this is where God continues to show up for us. In our pain. In our fears. In our confusion. In our grief. In our loss. In our uncertainty.

I don't know every hardship you are facing today, or every pain you are feeling. But God does. And He is there, bringing peace to calm your heart. So, peace not only comes in the midst of our storms, but peace also defies our circumstances.

Peace defies our circumstances.

Some of you may be thinking "That is easy for you to say, but you don't know how much it hurts ... how bad it really is."

Perhaps I don't know how bad. I can only imagine how awful it is, and I can only agree with how unfair it is.

But let me encourage you that there is a peace that is deeper, there is a peace that defies your circumstances.

Perhaps in the face of all you are feeling and have gone through, God's peace might not make sense to you, but I can assure you that it is real. And it is healing. And it can guard your heart from continuing wounds. And it can protect your mind from the onslaught of anxiety and worry.

The apostle Paul describes the process like this in our second lesson this morning...

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all ... do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation ... present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus". Philippians 4:4-7

Let me encourage each of us today, no matter what we are facing, that this process begins with us turning to God, bringing our hurts and questions and doubts and whys and needs directly to Him. As Paul says it, "In every situation ...

present your requests to God.”

I don't pretend to fully understand it, but there is a power in prayer and a transformation that grows from gratitude. It's not the power of getting what we want or convincing God to see things our way. We can try, and He will listen.

But much more than that, the power of prayer happens in this experience of peace as our perspective changes, and we find an understanding that God is with us, no matter what.

And an acknowledgment and acceptance that He's got this, He can be trusted, He is enough.

Peace comes in the midst of our storms, and peace defies our circumstances. Finally...

Peace is a person.

It all comes back to a person. Peace is Jesus Christ. Paul says in Ephesians 2:14, “For he himself is our peace.”

And long before His arrival on earth, the prophet Isaiah called Jesus the Prince of Peace.

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given ... He will be called ... Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of ... peace there will be no end.” Isaiah 9:6

There are political-sounding tones to this message, and you can see why the Jews who wanted their political freedom and independence were eager to see a political Messiah.

But more importantly, there are tones of the completion of Christ's work and His eventual establishment of God's kingdom.

But most of all, this child that is born, this Son that is given to us, brings the power and rule of His peace into our personal lives. He is the bringer of peace between us and God, the sacrificial lamb, the giver of life.

He is the embodiment of shalom that we find in our relationship with Him.

Jesus is the God who is come to be with us, and He offers us this invitation in this Advent season and always:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and

you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”
Matthew 11:28-30

Is that not an offer of peace? I encourage you to let those words just sink in.

And in this second week of Advent, let me encourage you to look for the Prince of Peace, even when the winds blow and the mighty storms come about.

Let me encourage you to come to Him and worship like the shepherds, even when we find ourselves in the darkness of the storms. Let me remind you to come to Him. Because He is here. The Prince of Peace is with us.

May Jesus be your peace this week, guarding your soul with peace, filling your spirit with the wholeness of shalom, and ruling as the Prince of Peace in your heart. Amen