

God Gives Us Peace

From the series, "Things God Gives Us At Christmas – And All Year Round"

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Introduction

My Grandfather served in the United States Navy. I don't know the exact year that he started, but it was in the 1930s.



He started as a rank enlisted sailor and worked his way up to commissioned officer in 1938. During his time in the Navy, he sailed to numerous places around the world including a stint at the arctic circle in 1940. After serving his time in what must have been a difficult post, he was transferred to warmer waters. In 1941, my Grandfather found himself with the rank of lieutenant serving on a ship that was stationed at the U.S. Naval station in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

The date was Saturday, December 6, 1941.

The ship my grandfather served on was scheduled to depart for open waters the following day: Sunday, December 7. In the afternoon, the captain of the ship came to his officers with a question: "Is this ship ready to sail"? The officers all reported that yes, the ship was ready. The captain said, "If we wait until tomorrow, we'll have to wait in a long line to get out of the harbor. If we're ready, we should go now."

With that, the order was given, and my Grandfather's ship left Pearl Harbor on the afternoon of December 6, 1941. Before sunset, the ship let down its anchor off the coast of the Island of Maui, ready to set sail for its destination the next morning.

If you're a student of history, you know what happened the next morning. It's something we remember every year on December 7. On that morning, Sunday, December 7 1941, the radios on the ship lit up with sound. Pearl harbor had been attacked. Most of the ships there had been sunk or horribly damaged. Thousands had died.

Providence had caused the captain of the ship my Grandfather served on to move to a location that took it away from the main target area, so it had escaped the attack. My Grandfather was safe for the moment, but he was about to experience a major life change.

When he joined the U.S. Navy in the 1930s, the world was at peace. Many who live in the U.S. today are surprised to learn that the U.S. didn't have the most powerful military in the world at that time. There was no need. No one had attacked us since the war of 1812.

Other areas of the world were in conflict. In 1937, an incident at a place called the Marco-Polo bridge brought China and Japan into war. But that was somewhere far away in Asia. In September of 1939, Hitler had invaded Poland. But that was over in Europe.

As far as anyone who lived in the U.S. was concerned, war was in other places, and we had successfully stayed out.

But now, all that changed. My Grandfather, although he was part of a military, was not trained mainly as a fighter. He was a supply manager. He described himself as a "paper-pusher". Soon after the conflict started, my Grandfather was called into the office of his commanding officer. He was told that he was no longer a peacetime-paper-pusher. He was to be put in charge of a gun crew. With that, he was led to one of the gun installations. While he was there, the gun-crew explained how the guns worked.

Then something bad happened. While inspecting one of the mechanisms, my Grandfather's sleeve got caught on the trigger. A shell was launched from the gun. My Grandfather and his new gun crew could only watch in horror as the shell flew towards the island of Maui. It landed on the shore and went off with a large explosion.

Years later, my Grandfather shared this story. A major war had just started. Thousands were lost. After all this, he just lobbed a shell onto U.S. territory. He was certain he would be court marshalled.

Fortunately, no one was hurt, and nothing important was damaged. The Navy had much bigger things to worry about, so the incident was forgiven.

In fact, one of my Grandfather's fellow officers had some artistic talent, so he drew up a special document. It was a colorful certificate commemorating my Grandfather and his gun crew for firing the first and last shot in what the certificate called, "The Battle of Maui". My Grandfather was credited with destroying 20 enemy pineapple plants, 2 enemy groundhogs, and 4,000 enemy ants.

From that day forward, my Grandfather's military experiences in World War II were more serious. But, those experiences started on a fateful day - The day my Grandfather was transformed from a low-level office manager to a man of war.

What would it be like to live in peace one day, and find out the next that you're at war?

Right about now is the time someone asks, "It's Christmas - What does this have to do with Christmas?" And as always, I'm glad you asked. It's important because we're going to read a story about some people who thought they were living in peace, but who discovered that they were at war.

We're in our series, "Things God Gives Us At Christmas, and All Year Round". Today, we're going to talk about the fact that God gives us peace.

In a moment, we'll read a familiar part of the Christmas story. Before we do that, let me give you a quick summary of the events that lead up to what we're reading. Two people, Joseph and Mary, are summoned to a little town called Bethlehem near the city of Jerusalem in ancient Israel. She's pregnant, and ready to give birth. Both she and her husband Joseph have been told by an angel that the baby she is carrying is no ordinary human child. He is someone the Jewish people called "The Messiah". From his conception on his life will be characterized by amazing displays of God's power. The couple doesn't have a lot of money. There is no room for them at the local hotel, so on the night that she's ready to give birth she has to go to a stable.

In modern language, the folks at the Motel 6 did not leave the lights on for them. The inn had no red roof, and the Marriot was not family friendly.

In that stable, Mary gives birth to a baby boy. There is no bed, so Joseph has to shoo the animals away from a feeding trough in order to lay the child down.

Now we're ready to read our text.

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." (Luke 2:8-14)

What's going on here? In order to find out, we need to learn some things about the Shepherds in the story.

Who Were the Shepherds?

We don't know a lot about these men, but we can piece some things together. These shepherds were watching their sheep during the night. That's important.



Our picture here is of a man watching sheep during the day. That's because it's hard to get a picture of sheep at nighttime in the dark. But that's OK, because this picture probably looks like what it would be like to be a shepherd in ancient Israel near Jerusalem. Jerusalem is up in the mountains. As such it's surrounded by rugged mountainous terrain. Although Israel is in a warm part of the world, the mountains get chilly. It can even snow on occasion.

Sometimes, people assume that shepherds are poor. Not always. You can become prosperous raising sheep if you own lots of them. Today, we talk about "ranchers", people who own lots of livestock. However, if you're a rancher, a successful landowner with lots of livestock, you don't handle the menial jobs - Things like staying up all night watching the animals. You give those jobs to underlings. So, these shepherds probably didn't have a lot of income.

They also didn't have a very interesting job. Hopefully, at night the sheep are asleep. The shepherds were just making sure that no wild animals or thieves came by. Let's say you took an employment poll in the ancient world. You ask a lot of people to rate their jobs. I'm guessing that people who had to stay up all night with sleeping sheep probably ranked their jobs high on the boredom factor. But something was about to change for these men. It will change because they met some angels.

Who Were the Angels?

An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. (Luke 2:9)

In order to understand this scene, you have to understand the ancient world. There was no electricity, so there were no bright lights. No billboards. No streetlamps. No brightly lit buildings. No headlights coming down the road. No one had ever seen intense, bright lights at night. We're told these men saw the "glory of the Lord". It "shone around them". They saw something clearly not of this world. These men saw an angel, something few people have seen in all of history.

In Christmas cards, angels are often portrayed as beautiful, feminine women with long, flowing blond hair playing golden harps. Or, they're shown as childlike beings who are so cute you want to hug the card.

The Bible portrays angels very differently; as mystical beings of great power. They're said to brandish swords of fire. Sometimes they're portrayed with the forms of ferocious animals.

We don't know exactly what these men saw, but whatever it was, 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." (Luke 2:10)

Imagine these men. The phrase "deer in the headlights" doesn't begin to describe them. They are so scared they can't move. So, the angel tells them, "don't be afraid".

Understand, this could be the angel of death. This could be the angel of the final judgement; the end of the world. But it's not any of those things. The angel says, "Don't be afraid - I bring you good news." In other words, "You're going to be very happy when you hear this". "This" the angel says, "will cause great joy".

In our last session, we talked about the fact that God gives us joy. There's a lot of joy in this story. But, not just joy. And not just for these men. The angel says, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for **all the people.**"

What could do that? What could bring joy to all people?

"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord." (Luke 2:11)

These men, these shepherds, likely didn't have a lot of money. But, they did have something. -They had faith.

This was the land of Israel, populated by the Jewish people. Every faithful Jew looks forward to the coming of a very special man. Their word is "Ha Messiach". In English, we have no perfectly equivalent word, so we transliterate; we use our letters as closely as we can. In English he is the "Messiah", the anointed one (that means, "approved"). He is the chosen one; the great king sent by God to rule the world forever.

Some translations say "Christ, the Lord". The Greek word "Christos" means "anointed" or "chosen" one. These words all point to the same thing.

Here's something interesting: The angels don't just say he was born. Most babies are born to their parents. The angel said, this baby, the Messiah, has been born, **to you.**

“This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” (Luke 2:12)

In order to understand this, you have to understand something about the Jewish religion, and the Christian faith that came out of the Jewish religion. Those who follow the writings of Moses know that he spoke of a great prophet who would follow him. This was later known as the Messiah that we spoke about.

Moses also warned that there would be false prophets. Following a false prophet is a terrible thing. How could anyone know the difference? Moses told people how. When a true prophet came, there would be signs. A sign involves a prediction. A prediction of an event is made, and the prediction comes true.

The shepherds didn't ask for a sign, but the angel offered one anyway. This sign would have two purposes. First, in order to have authority, it had to be something unusual. There's no point in a sign if it's common. If I say, "It's going to get dark tonight, and then light will come in the morning", that's not a sign. That's common. Second, there would likely be multiple children in any town, so the shepherds would need to know which one was this special child.

So, the angel gave a sign that met both criteria. First, the sign gave the location of the child. The shepherds were not to look in a palace. That would make sense for a king. They were not to look in the great Temple of Jerusalem. That would make sense for a prophet.

They were to go to Bethlehem, a small town nearby, and look for a child in a manger.

What's a manger?



A manger is a feeding trough – a place to hold food for farm animals. **Now, that's different.** You don't normally find babies in feeding troughs. Even the poorest of parents try to find a nice place for their babies to sleep.

Here's where western art lets us down. Many European paintings portray the baby Jesus as having a glow. That's not what the angel said. It didn't say, "Look for the radioactive baby". It said, "Look for what looks to be a normal child, dressed the same way all babies are dress – But, look for it in a very unusual place".

So, when the shepherds went to look for this special child, they would know with great certainty that they found it. And they would know that this Messiah, this great king, wasn't born just for its parents. It certainly wasn't born only for the powerful and privileged. It was born for them. It would bring great joy to all people.

As if this wasn't enough; as if these shepherds hadn't seen enough special things that no one else had ever seen.

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." (Luke 2:13-14)

So, the shepherds didn't just see one angel. The sign of a baby in a manger was significant. But alone, perhaps it wouldn't signal the coming of such an incredible person. This was more than an event. This was the coming of a new age; a new chapter in the story of mankind. The whole story would take pages and chapters and books to describe. It would summarize all the things God had spoken to mankind in the past. In the future, it would take what was later called the New Testament to give the human race the information they needed to enter this new age.

But here are the first words of this new age: "...on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

The shepherds were likely in no shape to think about what they heard. They just ran to find the child. And find him they did, just as they were told. From there they ran around telling everyone.

Let's think about what they were told. "On earth, peace to those on home his (God's) favor rests. Some translations of this read: "...on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased (ESV)"

Peace

That statement has two parts. First, peace. The concept of peace occurs in many languages. I would be tempted to say all languages, but I'm not an expert in all languages. Knowing the human condition, I'm guessing that all languages have a concept of peace. "Peace" is a word that can have many meanings. On one level, peace can mean "freedom from conflict". Usually though, there's something more that comes with the word. A word that has this similar quality is "healthy". To say "you're healthy" can mean you're not sick. But more often, we think of healthy as something more. Healthy means that someone is full of wellness.

With peace, it's the same way. And God certainly offers his followers that kind of peace.

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:7)

God offers wonderful personal peace to those who follow him. But, as wonderful as that is, there's something even greater going on here. Let's look at the beings announced all of this.

“Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel...”
(Luke 2:13)

Do you know what a “host” is? We often think of a host as someone who has a party and invites people over. Here, the word means something very different. “Host” is a word that can also mean “army”, or even “armies”. The shepherds looked up into the skies and saw armies of angels.

Why did God have to introduce this new era, this new stage in the history with an army? We started our talk today with the story of my Grandfather. He was a man who was one day a peaceful man who managed paper. The next day, his life changed. His life changed because hostilities had just broken out. He found that he was living in a world at war. In his world, people fought with each other. The soldiers of nations battled against the soldiers of other nations.

In our world, something different has happened. My friends, we live in a world at war. You might say, “but I don't see any war. I don't see armies or explosions.” ***That's because our war isn't an earthly war.***

If the shepherds attended synagogue on the Sabbath, they might have heard their rabbi read the following words:

Why do the nations conspire
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the Lord and against his anointed, saying,
“Let us break their chains
and throw off their shackles.” (Psalm 2:1-3)

According to the Scriptures, the whole world is in a rebellion. We battle against our Creator. God should be the rightful king of the earth. But the world doesn't want him to be king. They want to live in a world without of God.

When did this start? It started way back in the garden of Eden. God offered the first humans a perfect world. But they rejected everything he offered them. They didn't realize it, but when they did that, they started a war. Their actions caused things to break. Things that used to work for the benefit of mankind would now fight us.

“Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you... (Genesis 3:17(b)- 18(a))

So, nature fights against us. After centuries of hard work, we have learned to beat back the thorns and thistles, the weeds and the insects. But, it's hard work. And the thorns and thistles grow into earthquakes and hurricanes and tornadoes. When we see those coming, we can only run.

And worse, we battle against our own bodies.

By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”
(Genesis 3:19)

Someday, we will all die. We are at war with our bodies. As we age, one by one, parts of our bodies start to malfunction causing pain, debilitation, and eventually a full stoppage of our bodily functions. No one survives.

We're also in conflict with all of our fellow humans. It might be the bully in elementary school. It might be the thief that breaks in during the night. It might be the bombs of a terrorist. It might be time times that our whole planet enters into world-wide conflict.

All of these conflicts, whether the war with nature, the war with our bodies, or the wars among nations, started with war against God.

What is the solution? The solution that God offers was to send the armies of angels that could very well be commanded to wipe us all off the face of the earth. But instead of doing that, those armies announced an offer of peace. Those armies escorted a small child into the world. A child who was more than just one more child.

He was the Jesus, the Messiah, the great king. He was not a king who came to demand the benefits of royalty. Instead, he came to serve others. He didn't come to make war. He came as an ambassador of peace. He didn't come to kill. He came to heal. He didn't come to hate. He came to love.

The work and life of Jesus is described in numerous ways in the Scripture. Here is one very pertinent description from the Apostle Paul:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Colossians 1:19-20)

“...to those on whom his favor rests”.

I mentioned earlier that there were two parts to the announcement of the angels. We’ve just talked about peace. Then there’s the phrase “to those on whom his favor rests”. What does that mean? To answer that, we have to go all the way back to the creation of the world. God created this world for us, for the human race. **He did that because he loved us.** We answered his love and generosity by starting a rebellion. We started a war, and we’re made a real mess of things.

But with all the damage we’ve done God still loves us dearly. That’s why he offers us peace. Jesus offers to take all the penalties that we deserve for our bad choices, our bad behavior, our sin. He offers to take away our sins by carrying them on the cross. If we accept that offer, we can have peace with God.

But, you must choose. Friends, God will not force peace upon you. If he did that, the peace would be worthless. It would be the peace of a conqueror forcing non-compliant enemies to their knees for all eternity. That’s what the Romans tried to do at the time of Christ. They wanted to introduce a “Pax Romanus” into the world. This was a peace achieved by the power of conquering armies forcing the whole world to comply. Because it’s a human idea, it failed.

That’s not the kind of peace anyone wants. It’s certainly not what God wants for you.

And so, there is a warning here. We talk about Advent season. During this time, we celebrate the first advent, the first coming, of Jesus Christ – his birth. A day will come when Jesus will have a second advent, a second coming. The Apostle John wrote about it in the book of Revelation. When that day comes, Jesus will return not with an offer of peace, but a sword. Those who have chosen to accept his offer of peace will be rescued and ushered into an eternal world. A world reborn to be everything that it was created to be. A world of eternal peace with God.

Those who choose to remain in the rebellion, those who choose to keep fighting against God, will face the armies of the great king. We don’t want our friends, the people we love and care about, to face that fate.

Let’s pull this all together

Conclusion

There are things that God offers us at Christmas, and all year round. One of those things is peace.

We started with the story of my Grandfather, a man who lived in a time of peace, but who discovered one day that the world was at war.

We moved on to some simple shepherds, who lived in peace. One night, they saw armies of angels. They learned that night that their world was at war; spiritual war. They also learned that God was going to offer them peace.

Today, we live under the illusion that the world is at peace because we don't see the constant attacks of armies on our home soil. But, as we have learned today, our whole world is at war; a spiritual battle that has gone on for centuries since the fall of mankind in the Garden.

-And we have learned that God offers us peace.

Centuries ago, a group of shepherds saw angels who told them where a very special child was born. They saw the child, and they worshipped him. Then, they ran and told everyone they could. That's what we're doing. That's one of the reasons our church exists. We're telling all our friends about the great king who offers us peace.

If you've never done this before – if you've never accepted the offer of peace that God offers through Jesus Christ, please do it right away. Come visit our church, Trinity Church of Teaneck NJ. All the info you need is on our web site, TrinityTeaneck.org.

Or, visit Billy Graham's web site, PeaceWithGod.net.

As for the rest of us, let's join with the shepherds, the wise men, and Joseph and Mary. If we listen hard enough, maybe we can hear the words of the old Christmas carol:

Hark the herald angels sing
"Glory to the newborn king"
Peace on earth, and mercy mild
God and sinners reconciled.
Joyful all ye nations rise.
Join the triumph of the skies.
With the angelic hosts proclaim:
"Christ is born in Bethlehem"
Hark! The herald angels sing
"Glory to the newborn king"