

Peace on Earth Luke 2:8-14

There is no word that appears at Christmas more often than peace. There is no word that makes its way into holiday displays, both private and public, in shopping malls, on street signs, in front of people's homes. In Mitch Park there is a giant light display that reads "Peace." Signs dangle from light poles up and down the street and in parking lots that announce "Peace." It seems that about a third of the Christmas cards we get have a stamp in their upper right corner proclaiming "Peace." If you buy a cup of coffee at Starbucks, the cup is as likely to say peace as it is not. At Rockefeller Center in New York, maybe the most famous holiday display in the world—there is a giant sign that says, "Peace."

We are more likely to see the word "Peace" at Christmas than we are the name Jesus. And that's ironic because near as I can tell, the promotion, the idea, the cause of peace is directly linked with Jesus' entry into this world.

You have heard it before and it is never more true than at Christmas. No Jesus—no peace.

Luke's Gospel tells us that on the night the Word of God who became flesh, God's only Son, Jesus, first saw light and breathed oxygen in this world, emerging from Mary's womb amid blood and water,—that in a field not far away—likely just a mile and a half—there were some shepherds watching over a flock of sheep through the night. It was dark and a messenger from the Lord, an angel, suddenly appeared to them and God's glory shone brightly piercing the dark night, casting light far and wide, illuminating the tall grass of the shepherds' field. The shepherds were filled with fear, quaking in their robes and sandals. This angel sent by God shared a message, a proclamation of an event that changed the world forever and altered the balance of the cosmos, the greatest event in human history:

Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.

Luke 2:10-12

They proclaimed a Savior, the Messiah, God Himself coming into this world, the mighty King of Kings, was born a tiny infant, weak, vulnerable, helpless. In the first century Palestine, the infant mortality rate was about 30%. There were no doctors or nurses or midwives. There was no Neonatal Intensive Care Unit to rush the Savior of the World into in case something went wrong. As far as we can tell there was not even so much as a pacifier to stick in His mouth. But as we have come to know Him, we know that vulnerability and discomfort was nothing foreign to this King.

But on the day of His birth, it was a strange circumstance to find the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And despite the presence and proclamation of an angel of the Lord—the Bible does say Satan sometimes appears as angel of light—the shepherds might not have fully believed.

But whatever disbelief the shepherds had was washed away by what happened next:

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

Luke 2:13-14

The sky was unexpectedly and rapidly filled with a host of angels, an angelic chorus, hundreds of hundreds, if not thousands, further illuminating the dark night, expanding upon the miraculous message first brought by the lone angel.

And they had a simple message, this Messiah, this Savior, this King is bringing peace from God to His people.

And the shepherds were so excited that immediately did the one thing they were not supposed to do. They abandoned their one job. They left their dumb and defenseless sheep and ran to meet this baby King who was bringing peace to a world at war. They wanted peace so badly they were willing to lose everything they had to receive it.

We could all use a little peace today, right?

War is not a present reality for us—at least not yet. But disagreement is. Discord is. Distress is. Frustration is. And in our present circumstances—all this conflict seems to be accelerating at geometric rate. It doesn't seem to matter if it is an election or everything involving the pandemic or reckoning with racism, nothing happens today without controversy and strife. Today we always live under a cloud of uncertainty, competing truths, disagreement, disillusionment and disparagement.

The term ‘siege culture’ was coined to define a group whose identity and power base was being challenged by external threats. Groups that adopt a ‘siege culture’ mentality turn inward and become defensive just like an ancient city whose enemies sit outside the walls to starve them out. Today it is hard not to feel like we are under siege all the time—particularly with competing truths. One columnist put it like this:

We grope, blindly, forced to independently assess a bewildering barrage of seemingly factual claims that arrive on our doorstep daily, with the lives of our children, parents, friends and neighbors hanging in the balance.

I experienced a few weeks ago not among folks here but with good people. And these good people literally talked over each other, not dealing in facts but choosing instead to characterize the motivations of the people they disagreed with. It was not an exchange of ideas but an attempted expose of each another's character and speculation upon motivations, rather than a free exchange, it was a war to claim the moral high ground.

And it's typical in a world where peace is fleeting.

This all comes about because in our natural, sinful condition, we are at war with God, even if we don't realize it. Hosea 4 puts it like this:

Hear the word of the LORD, O children of Israel, for the LORD has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land...Therefore the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish...

Hosea 4:1,3

We sure could use some peace.

That is why we are going to spend the next few weeks talking about peace.

The Greek word translated as peace here is the word **eirene**.

You may know the English word ‘irenic.’ When I was 24 someone wrote a letter of recommendation for me claiming I had an irenic personality. But I didn’t know what it meant. It sounded a lot like ironic to me and an ironic personality didn’t sound like a compliment at all. But I looked it up and an irenic spirit means you’re a peacemaker—and I liked that.

The Greek word eirene means a state of peace, meaning a time when there is no war. A time of eirene is when two warring parties, two nations, two factions, two sides are living under a treaty of peace.

The Greek word for peace is the New Testament word for an absolutely packed with meaning Old Testament word. In fact, this word may be the most loaded word in the Old Testament and word some of you may know.

It’s the word **shalom**. Here it is in Hebrew

The word shalom is often translated as peace but that is sort of a pale, lukewarm interpretation that doesn’t come close to matching the richness and depth of the word shalom.

The simplest interpretation for shalom is simply to say, “**The way things are supposed to be.**” Shalom is the state of the created order, this broken world, reflecting the Divine intent. Shalom is a state of peace between humanity and God. The Biblical word for that is righteousness. Shalom is a state of peace between human beings. The Biblical word for that is justice. So, shalom is a state of perfect justice and righteousness. It is a state where God’s presence among humanity is as thick as the morning fog. The Garden of Eden was a place of shalom. When Solomon opened the temple in Jerusalem and His presence filled the city, shalom felt like a reality. On Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended in Jerusalem upon people of multiplicity of races and tribes, for a brief instant there was a sense of shalom. When Jesus descends one day from heaven riding the clouds astride the Heavenly City, the New Jerusalem, shalom will wash over this world like a flood.

Psalms 85 is one of the key Biblical passages that describe Shalom:

Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace (shalom) to his people, to his saints...Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other. Faithfulness springs up from the ground, and righteousness looks down from the sky. Yes, the LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. Righteousness will go before him and make his footsteps a way.

Psalm 85:8,10-13

This is what we all long for. We all seek, whether we can name it or not steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, peace and shalom in our relationships with others. We want shalom with God, we want shalom in our soul, with ourselves.

How do achieve that shalom?

We don't. We can't. We don't achieve shalom. We don't earn shalom.

Shalom is a gift. Peace is a gift from God.

Who were these shepherds watching over their flocks by night? Do we have any evidence they had done anything to create peace, achieve peace? Were they worthy? They were just out standing in their field making sure no one stole their sheep and peace came into this world a mile and a half away, lying in a stone feedbox, wrapped tight in a bundle—eating and crying and sleeping.

They didn't do anything. Peace is a gift. It was for them and it is for you and me.

There is a phrase used a handful of times in the Old Testament—**covenant of peace**. This is what the angel proclaimed to the shepherds that day—God's covenant of peace. And this is clear meaning of the Greek word for peace "eirene. "Eirene" is a time of interlude in an everlasting war. So, in the coming of the Word of God in the flesh into this world, God has called an end to the war between humanity and God. God initiated a covenant of peace founded and grounded and held indissolubly together in the tiny fragile body of a seven-pound, eight ounce baby Jesus.

What does covenant of peace do? What does it look like?

One of these occasions the phrase Covenant of Peace is used is in the Old Testament book of Ezekiel Chapter 34. It's long passage, but its worth reading because it goes into such great detail about what God's covenant of peace looks like:

I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild beasts from the land, so that they may dwell securely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods. And I will make them and the places all around my hill a blessing, and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. And the trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase, and they shall be secure in their land. And they shall know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke, and deliver them from the hand of those who enslaved them. They shall no more be a prey to the nations, nor shall the beasts of the land devour them. They shall dwell securely, and none shall make them afraid. And I will provide for them renowned plantations so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land, and no longer suffer the reproach of the nations. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, declares the Lord GOD. And you are my sheep, human sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, declares the Lord GOD."

Ezekiel 34:25-31

What does this tell us about God's covenant of peace?

First, **the covenant of peace is God's work**. Not ours.

God's proclamation of peace begins with the very briefest of words which tells us so very much. It's the word, "I." In fact the word "I" appears eight times in that passage.

"I will make with them a covenant of peace," God says. He didn't say, "We will make a covenant" or "Let's work together" or even "Lets talk about our differences and how we can get along."

That's not how God does it.

God takes the initiative. God makes it happen. And it is His work. Our work, our effort, is supplemental. It is a response to His

And the birth of Jesus is the highest example of that. God came to us, humble, low, meek, mild, and vulnerable. He chose to come as an infant, rather than a hurricane, a blinding light, a fiery blaze, a tornado, a consuming flood of righteousness and glory.

I cannot put it any better than the Puritan preacher George Whitefield who said:

He came not in glory or in splendour, not like him who brought salvation with him. No, he was born in a stable and laid in a manger. Oxen were his companions. O amazing condescension of the Lord Jesus Christ, to stoop to such low and poor things for our sake. What love is this that the Son of God should come into our world!

Peace is not the work of a man who leaves earth to go to heaven to meet God. Peace is the work of a God who leaves heaven to come to earth to meet man.

Next, the covenant peace changes our world.

God's covenant of peace is not warm wishes, happy thoughts, look on the bright side, chin up, after the rain comes the rainbow kinds of sentiment. God's covenant of peace does not instill us with a vain hope that keeps us going until it is proven false.

The covenant of peace changes our world.

Ezekiel tells us that because of the covenant of peace, God will banish the wild beasts from the land and make all the places around God's people a blessing. The trees will be laden with fruit and the land will produce abundantly. And they will be set free from slavery and there will be no more hunger or shame or fear to just name a few things.

God's covenant of peace changes our world.

Yesterday morning, I was able to spend some time with Terry Attebery and Missy and his sons Brian and Justin. Terry was not awake as we sat by his bed and prayed over him, multiple times. There were tears of course—but in the words of Paul, we were not hopeless. I have been by death beds where there was not much hope.

But not yesterday. Death had no power, no sting in Room 303 at Integris yesterday afternoon.

God's covenant of peace changes our world, in tangible, real ways. And one of those ways—the greatest of those ways—is death's power over this world. And the covenant of peace has changed Terry's life. My last words to Terry yesterday were, "I'll see you later."

And I said it and I repeat those words to you with absolute, unassailable confidence—not as a vain hope, or a desperate platitude unmoored from reality. I say it as unimpeachable fact.

We will see our brother Terry again.

And we know that because the baby Jesus—God--was born in cave used to stable animals.

30 plus years later, after the stone was rolled away, He walked out of a cave used to decay the body of the dead and gather their bones to lay with their fathers and mothers.

And the covenant of peace changed this world. The covenant of peace put death to death.

The ancient theologian Athanasius said:

For the race of men had gone to ruin, had not the Lord and Savior of all, the Son of God come among us...

The covenant of peace changes this world.

Finally, the covenant of peace is unbreakable.

This passage ends with these words:

I am the LORD their God with them...And you are my sheep, human sheep of my pasture, and I am your God.

There is no if/ then statement there. God left Himself no op out clause. The Lord does not hedge His bets or play a game of wait and see.

Jesus is all in with you. God took on flesh, became a man—not in appearance only, not for a while, not for a lifetime, not even for a millennium or two or three—but eternally. And because God became a man, a man is God. Our Lord God is with us and we are His—forever.

Just as the union between God and man in Jesus cannot be undone, the union between the Lord God and the whole of humankind cannot be undone.

Let me ask you a question with all seriousness this morning. Wherever you are, here in the sanctuary or at home or sitting in the car waiting for someone.

Are you in controversy or covenant with God?

Are in you conflict with Jesus? Or have you seized and received His covenant?

You may think its too late. You may think you've done too much, your sin is too great or God could not possibly love someone like you.

Untrue. It's simply false. His covenant is unbreakable. You could no more go back and choose not to be born than you can cancel God's covenant with you.

You can have peace this morning. You may not see angels in the sky proclaiming peace. It is just the Word of God preached from a leather-bound Bible—but the promise, the covenant, the truth is just the same. God has come to you and promised peace.

Will you receive it? Will you simply say, "Yes, Jesus. I want your peace."

And peace you shall have. Now and eternally.

