



Sermon

25 December 2023

Peace on Earth

Isaiah 9:2-7, Luke 2:1-14, Titus 2:11-14

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In the dark hours as the first Christmas Day began, God's answer came to the cry of the prophet Isaiah, "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down!"

In the fullness of time, the opportune time came 7 centuries after that cry. Mary waited in the dark night, holding her enlarged belly, cradling the baby inside her, as mothers all around the world cradle theirs and wait for the birth. God had rended the heavens and come down, personally come, to make a way to restore things to how they were supposed to be.

A huge angelic choir appeared with the Archangel Gabriel, singing, "Glory to God in the highest! On earth, peace, goodwill towards people on whom his favour rests."

And it all started in an unremarkable village, in a small, war-ravaged country at the crossroads of the East. It started with a tiny babe, helpless and dependant on the trembling care of a teenaged girl, when his rightful place was in heaven, enthroned in glory.

Through the centuries up to that point, God's heart-cry was summarised by Isaiah

"All day long I have spread out My hands to a stubborn and rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, [following] after their own thoughts and intentions."(Amplified Bible)

It's just the same these days. At quite a few funerals I have attended, "I did it my way," is the proud attitude expressed.

Often, in our search for the good life, we are focussed on our best efforts to control our situations, our spouses, our families, even ourselves, but that is not the path to peace.

We can't make things into the way they are meant to be, but God can. We try and try, but we finally have to admit that we cannot control everything. When we turn to God for help, anxiety falls away. Peace comes, because we recognise that He is good and that all will ultimately be well.

It's that simple. God never intended it to be complicated or beyond our reach.

I have a friend who is recovering from a cancer operation. Through her illness, what she has talked most about is peace. When she has peace, she can cope with anything. She is outward-looking, concerned for others, joyful even. But when her peace disappears, joy goes; small troubles become big; everything is an effort.

The peace we crave is not dependant on everything going right and it is not dependant on ourselves to produce it. Jesus says in John chapter 14, "My peace I give you, my peace I leave you; don't be afraid."

Isaiah spoke of the coming Messiah, the Prince of Peace. *"Of the increase of his government and of peace, there will be no end."* So as we consciously align ourselves with his ways, his governance, we will experience more and more peace. We will be receivers of *and* carriers of peace into chaotic situations. I'm not talking about the kind of peace that the world seeks - that's often just an absence of conflict. The peace that most people seek looks like a still lake rippling gently against the feet of majestic mountains, reflecting clear, blue skies. The peace of God is more like an eagle flying high above a storm, supported by wind currents that cannot be seen.

That's peace with no visible means of support. Sometimes that's what people imagine life to be like when we are holy, like Mother Teresa ...floating 6 inches off the floor. But I'm not Mother Teresa and I doubt if you are her look-alike either!

God is not a cardboard cut-out with a pasted-on smile, and he doesn't expect us to be that either. He responds to us and lives with us as we struggle. He knows we are fallible, and the best thing, is that he provides the centre of gravity for our lives, even if we are thrown about by various situations. He calls us to return to him, to return to our centre of gravity when we stray.

I remember when we were in Tanzania last August. In the first village, we met a woman who was full of vibrant joy which showed as she danced and sang in worship. When we went to the next village, she walked 7 hours to get to the meeting, in full knowledge that when she walked another 7 hours home in the dark through countryside inhabited by wild-beasts, she would be greeted by an angry husband who habitually beat her for attending a church service. And she walked, full of joy and peace. Full of the Prince of peace.

Closer to home, our staff team at St Stephen's have faced significant challenges in the past couple of months. The peace of God has kept us buoyant through spiritual attack, Covid infection, operations, aggro and accidents. We are not immune to difficulty but God's peace has been our centre of gravity in a turning world.

So let's turn back to Isaiah 9. The Hebrew people are described as having to fight for their existence against powerful foes, Assyrians and Midianites, to such an extent that they are described as people living in the shadow of death.

But Isaiah declares that war is not the way out of their embattled situation. And it is the same for us, whatever or whomever we are struggling with.

The answer is a baby. "For unto us, a child is born. Unto us, a son is given." When we look at the little manger under this altar, it is like us. We are spiritually empty and barren until he fills us. Jesus brings his shalom peace when we welcome him into our hearts and lives, allowing him to mould and shape us, producing beauty and life.

That shalom peace is not merely the absence of hostility. It means the putting back together of what has been divided. How is that possible? Verse 14 says, "The zeal of the Lord will accomplish this."

Such rest, such relief from tension! Nobody here needs to be wise enough, holy enough, strong or clever enough. Sweat won't do it. No one has to work hard enough to earn the privilege of walking in God's peace.

"The zeal of the Lord will accomplish it." He's keen! We just need to open the door, and our everlasting Father, our Prince of Peace will unfold his gifts of grace and forgiveness inside us.

Already, Jesus has paid the ultimate price of giving his life in exchange for our forgiveness. The invitation is there, our welcome is assured. You and I are why Jesus left the comfort of heaven. He left splendour, honour and glory to enter this world the same way we entered it. He endured being brought up by imperfect parents, just as we all did. And he suffered hardship and death so that we too might see a great light, be full of joy, be set free from guilt, bondage and oppression of spirit.

Unto us, a child is born. Unto us a son is given. He is called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Do you need wisdom in a tricky situation? Do you need powerful help? Do you ache for a Dad to whom you can unburden yourself and who gives consistent support? Do you crave that heavenly peace that carries you, even if circumstances do not change?

Unto us a child is born - and he will lead us to the Father. Let Father God establish his rule, his governance within us and our peace will be like a broad, powerful river. We don't have to be good enough. The zeal of the Lord will accomplish it. Let's grasp this opportune time, let's not let this Christmas pass by without inviting God to come and begin a fresh work in us, making us receivers and carriers of peace.