

The Nativity of Our Lord – December 24, 2023
Luke 2:1-20

Pastor Chris Repp
Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

“Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.” As if, huh? I mean the peace on earth part anyway. Were you thinking that a minute ago as we were singing the words of that famous Christmas hymn? Or are you less cynical than I can sometimes be, and a word of peace is actually what you came to hear tonight? Peace on earth? Is it possible? Will it ever happen? Will we ever be able to take our hands off each other’s throats and just live side by side in this world with our fellow human beings? If you pay any attention to current events, you know that there are at least a couple of hot wars going on in the world at the moment. Russia’s war on Ukraine is approaching the two-year mark with no end in sight. And Israel’s war on Hamas also continues in response to the vicious terrorist attack back in October. In both of those wars, civilians are caught in middle, men, women, children the elderly killed and maimed, as always happens in war. But even if those wars, half a world away, are out of sight and out of mind for you (and sorry for bringing them up if that’s you), peace remains elusive for most of us in this time of cultural and political polarization and animosity, egged on by social media that seem to live off of our fear and division. The more we are angry and divided, the better their bottom lines. And even if we somehow manage to ignore all of that divisiveness, we still run into conflict in our personal lives, within our families, and sometimes even in our most intimate relationships. And I haven’t even mentioned yet the specter of serious, life-threatening illnesses, accidents, or other tragedies that can shatter in and instant what little illusion of peace we may still manage to hold on to in spite of everything else.

I think we need that kind of personal reflection and mindset about us this evening if we are to have any chance at a meaningful connection with this story that is at once so familiar, and also so very foreign to our everyday experience. There are three things about this story that I want us to notice this evening in order to help us connect it with our own reality. First, the angel’s announcement is a challenge to the status quo and to the powers that be. Luke reminds us that Jesus’ birth took place during the reign of the Emperor Augustus, the longest reigning Roman emperor whose reign began roughly two hundred years of peace known already at the time of Luke’s writing as the Pax Romana, the Roman peace – two centuries in which there were no major wars in the empire. But that peace was relative. It was during this time of “peace” that the Romans brutally put down a rebellion of Jewish zealots in 70 AD and sacked the city of Jerusalem, destroying its second temple. Of course that hadn’t happened yet when the angel appeared to the shepherds, but it was certainly on the minds of Luke’s audience who first heard this story only a decade or so after those catastrophic events. To them, the angel’s message of peace was a finger in the eye of the Roman propaganda that depicted peace as Rome’s gift to the world. Now, Roman peace was certainly a thing. There was some truth to it. But it was peace that came with things like the census in this story that sent Joseph and Mary down to Bethlehem to be counted so that the Romans could know how much in taxes they could squeeze out of this newly-occupied territory. It was a peace that came with harsh suppression of any threat to Roman rule. The Romans didn’t invent crucifixion, but they perfected it as a tool for controlling the people they conquered. So, the angel’s message to the shepherds was a shot across the bow of Roman claims to power. “To you is born... a savior... who is the Messiah, the Lord” This is political language. It is as good as saying, Caesar is not your king and the Romans don’t rule the world. God is in charge, and is taking back control from those who have usurped it. Them’s fightin’ words right there.

The second thing we need to notice is just what it means that this message was delivered to shepherds. We don't have a lot of experience with shepherds anymore. So we don't have the kind of visceral reaction to shepherds that Luke's original audience would have had. You see, being a shepherd was way way down on the list of social respectability. It was the most menial of jobs, a job that was looked down on by most people. The equivalent would be jobs that most people don't want to do, the kind of jobs that tend to be filled by undocumented immigrants these days. So, God is finally making good on God's promise to save God's people and restore the world to the good creation it was always meant to be. And this earth-shaking news is shared not with elites, not with the rulers and the influencers, not with the A-list crowd, but with the lowest of the low. Take note. God is doing a new thing here. God's reclaiming of the world will not be a continuation of our business as usual. And God's peace will not be like the Roman Peace. It will not be top-down domination, but bottom-up capturing of our hearts. And notice how this plays out. The news was delivered to them, and they were told how they would recognize this newborn king. But they weren't ordered to go and see him or indeed to tell anyone about this good news that was shared with them. That was their idea. "Let's go see!" they said to each other. And why wouldn't you? And then when they did go and see, they couldn't help to tell people what had happened to them.

The third and final thing we need to notice here is Mary's reaction to all of this. This morning at our regular Sunday service we observed the 4th Sunday of Advent and our Gospel reading was from the previous chapter of Luke where the angel announces to Mary her extraordinary pregnancy, and she also learns of the pregnancy of her cousin Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. This news was out of the blue for Mary, totally unexpected. But somehow she trusted the angel's promise and consented to God's plan for her. Now here at the end of this story, after Mary had sung her famous song during her visit to Elizabeth about God's new way of doing things, and after now hearing the shepherds' story of the angel's news, Luke tells us that "Mary treasured all of these things and pondered them in her heart." The word "pondered" here means to put things together, to connect the dots, as it were. She's watching and she's catching on to what God is up to in her newborn son. And in this way she serves as a stand-in for you and me, and for all the readers and hearers of this Gospel account that has only just begun in this Christmas story.

What Mary does here is what we as a community of faith do tonight and throughout each church year as we attend to these stories that convey to us the promises of God that are for all people, as the angel told the shepherds. We treasure them, we read them again and again, and we try to connect the dots, both the dots with in the stories themselves and the dots that leap off the page and connect to our daily lives. Wherever you find yourself tonight, whether life is as good as it gets for you right now, whether you are in the midst of a crisis of one kind or another, or whether you are somewhere on the spectrum of experience between those two extremes, the angel's message is indeed for you too. To you is born a savior, a Messiah, the agent of God's reclamation and redemption of the world that includes you and your life. Through baptism into Jesus' death and resurrection God claims you as God's own to live authentically and abundantly, freed from the powers of sin, death, and evil that were conquered in the cross that Jesus is headed to in the rest of this story. There is indeed a deficit of peace, and hope, and love in the world. But God is at work right now, despite all evidence to the contrary, to do something about that. Peace has come to earth dear sister and brother in Christ, peace that passes all understanding. May that peace keep our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.