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The First Christmas Carols: The Angels' Song of Peace

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TEXT: Luke 2:8-14 (ESV)

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "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." 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!"

I had a phone conversation with my sister recently, who had called to let me know that her daughter and two young grandchildren were very sick with Covid. She was anxious and beside herself, and as she lamented, she said at one point in the conversation, "It's a crazy world, Steve, and it's driving me crazy." I've heard a lot of people say that sort of thing lately. There are plenty of things in this world of ours that can make us feel a little bit crazy and anxious; things like other people, politicians, unending wars, violence, the news, and social media. And so, people find themselves longing for some peace in the midst of this craziness. Not just peace and quiet, though, but peace within that calms us and takes away anxiety and fear. That kind of longing has been going on since humanity's sin entered this world of ours. It's been a big old crazy world ever since. And we long for peace.

Today, we read of an army of angels announcing that peace has come. They sang “Glory to God in the highest and on Earth peace among those with whom he is well pleased.” This is actually the third hymn surrounding the birth of Jesus in Luke's gospel. Earlier, we looked at Mary's Song and Zachariah's song, and now we had the Angels' song – different and unique because it comes not from the lips of a human being, but from an army of heavenly angels. That's what a heavenly host is – an army.

First, they opened their song with “Glory to God in the highest.” That word “glory” is used in two different ways in this particular encounter with the Bethlehem shepherds. The first time it's used to describe the brightness of God that shone around the shepherds. But then we're told that the angels sang “Glory to God in the highest.” This is a praise word you'll find in other places in scripture. It's an honoring word. It's what's called a doxology, giving praise to God for his nature and for what he's done. And this glorifying comes from the highest place, we're told: the courts of Heaven. Now there is a story behind this “Glory to God” praising. And the story is familiar to us: that Jesus was born that day in a stable in Bethlehem. And now an angel appeared before these cowering shepherds to announce the birth to them, of all people, with a rather shocking statement regarding the baby. He said, “I bring you good news of great joy for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a savior.” Someone's coming to rescue. This kid's on a rescue mission. “Who is Christ...” That's his title. The anointed one of God, a king, the Lord. Here's the identity of that child that's been born: the Lord, that's God's personal name.

So, this “Glory to God” praising is a response to a great thing that God has done. The eternal, omnipotent son of God has come. God himself has stepped into our broken world to save us and rule over us and connect us into a relationship with himself. And this infant is infinite: the Lord. John's gospel describes the same truth with these words: “In the beginning was a word, and the word was with God and the word was God, and the word became flesh and dwelt among us.” God has come to rescue. Heaven is breaking into Earth. God is entering human history and we're not forgotten nor abandoned by God. He's come to save us and to make us his own. And that good news is what inspired that giving glory to God and still does.

Now the second part of the angels' song tells us what God brings to us in the birth of this savior king: peace. He's come to bring peace to all people. Peace for his troubled

and crazy world. The prophet Isaiah described this child that would come as the “Prince of Peace.” Interestingly, at the same time when Jesus was born, the Roman emperor, Augustus Caesar, had issued his declaration called the *Pax Romana*, declaring peace under Roman domination for the whole ancient world. Quite a claim. Well, that peace is dwarfed by the peace for which the angels are praising God. Epictetus, a philosopher at that same time, observed rightly that “While the emperor may give peace from war on land and sea, he is unable to give peace from passion, grief, and envy. He cannot give peace of heart, for which men yearn far more than outward peace.” Caesar Augustus could not transform any of his subjects’ hearts or give them peace of heart or change any of their eternal futures. But the heavenly host declared that night in their song that this special baby could. That was why he had come: to bring peace.

The angels’ song, then, is an announcement of a peace that goes deep within a person and lasts beyond the grave. It's that peace for which men and women yearn, as the old philosopher says. This peace of God that invades a life and then gives peace of heart is based first on the personal discovery of peace with God. It's a relational peace. Today, the news is filled with all kinds of attempts at relational peace: peace between nations, between political parties, between husbands and wives, and so on. But as the philosopher said earlier, peace of heart proves to be elusive for us as human beings. No matter how hard we try to establish peace with each other, until we discover what it is to have peace with God (first things first), we're not going to discover the peace of God within and peace with others. It's humanly impossible. Because of our sinfulness, we've rebelled and declared independence against our ruler, God. So, this peace with God can only be brought about by the intervention of God himself. Only he can fix this. We may try to find peace with God in our own ways. Some try to find peace with God in their own strength, trying hard to obey religious rules or be good people that God can't reject. But we always fall short. The truth is, only God can give us peace with himself. That peace has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ, the son of God. Only he can give it. He purchased it for us at a cross on which he died 33 years after this birth in Bethlehem. We were lost in our sinfulness, helplessly separated from God with a debt we could not pay. The wrath of God was upon us, so God in Christ Jesus paid the penalty himself for our sinfulness, our debt, through his death on a cross. God was in Christ, making peace with us, but the blood of the cross. And through Christ Jesus, then, there is forgiveness of sins and peace with God. We are justified as we trust in faith in Christ, and that gives us peace with God.

A great expository preacher from the past named J.C. Ryle once wrote:

Without justification, it is impossible to have real peace. Conscience forbids it. Sin is a mountain between God and man and must be taken away. The sense of guilt lies heavy on the heart and must be removed. Unpardonable sin will murder peace. The true Christian knows all this well. His peace arises from a consciousness of his sins being forgiven and his guilt being put away. He has peace with God because he's justified.

This reconciled relationship with God through Jesus Christ, this justification, leads to the experience then of the peace of God working within us as we follow Jesus, as our savior and Lord. God, as you know, does not promise a peaceful life without peril or chaos, or hardship, but we can have his peace residing within us during those crazy times. And don't we all want that? [Robert] Morgan, in his book *Worry Less, Live More*, illustrates that fact that so many people in society are conscious of their anxiety and looking for peace when he writes:

Amazon keeps track of your highlights. When e-book owners mark sentences, the online retailer knows and notes it. Recently, Amazon released a list of the most popular passages in some of its best-selling books, such as *Hunger Games* and the *Harry Potter* series. It also released the most highlighted passage in the Bible. Now you would expect America's favorite biblical portion to be something like John 3:16 or Psalm 23, or the Lord's Prayer. But no, it was a less prominent text, one that strikes a deep chord in today's worried world, obviously. Philippians 4:6-7 written to the followers of Jesus Christ. It reads "Don't be anxious about anything, but in every situation by prayer and petition with Thanksgiving, present your request to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Jesus Christ."

People are looking for peace, and that peace of God, which has been made available for Christ's birth, death, and resurrection, actually covers your past and your present and your future. There's that peace of God from our past. We sometimes carry hurts and wounds. And this peace heals past hurts and wounds; his grace and love have the power to heal as we surrender them to his care. There's freedom from past regrets, as well, as God, looks at us and says, "I forgive you. Look at the cross. As far as the east is from the West, I have removed your transgressions away from you." Trusting in Christ, we have the peace of God in the present as well. The night before Jesus was crucified, he promised those disciples, "Peace I give to you. Not as the world gives, but as I give."

So many people are trying to find inner peace through things or other people or chemicals, and those things don't work. But Jesus Christ, the son of God, promises to come alongside of us and walk with us through the situations of life. And he will strengthen and comfort and carry us through the roughest patches when we turn to him in faith, opening his word for insight and talking to him in prayer. Some of you have lost loved ones since the last Christmas, probably. And you know exactly what I'm describing here. You've experienced that those carrying arms of God as you're trying to pick up the pieces. There have been so many times I've had grieving Christians say to me, "I don't know where I'd be without my faith in Christ."

Finally, there's the peace of God for the future that comes to the person who trusts in Christ and his promises. You know, life is filled with a lot of "what ifs," causing us to worry and be anxious. That's part of being human, I guess. But if you belong to Christ, God's reassuring message to you is,

You're mine forever. Nothing in this world can separate you from my love, not even death. Nothing can snatch you from my hand." Here's the big picture for you to hang on: I hold the future! My son will come again in power and glory and take away and take you to himself, and there'll be no more suffering, no more death, and I will wipe away those tears. There'll be, at last, perfect peace.

All this is what the angels were glorifying God for on that first Christmas night. Peace. Peace with God, and the peace of God. It's here, it's arrived. Now that's something God wants you to have, to receive. If you've not asked Jesus Christ into your life yet, it's an eternal gift that he offers every person who will trust in his son, Jesus Christ. That is actually his will for your life. Trusting in his son pleases him. That's what the angels meant that night as they sang, "Peace among those with whom he is pleased." That peace is also something to sing about, for those of us who have received him – giving glory and praise to God. He's given us, even as sinful as we are, the gift of his eternal peace through his son, Jesus, the Prince of Peace. So how can we possibly keep from singing?

I wanted to conclude with this little story about Christmas in Afghanistan 2008. Lee Bishop, a psychiatrist and military reservist, was stationed at Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan on Christmas Eve 2008. In the dim light of dusk, he watched as a procession of military vehicles approached the airfield, came to a stop, and carefully unloaded a flag draped steel casket. He knew that somewhere in the United States, a

family was going to suffer a Christmas homecoming that no one wanted. It was a heartbreaking scene to take in, and one all too familiar in war. But then another scene from that Christmas Eve. In an article for Christianity Today magazine entitled *Christmas in Afghanistan*, Bishop writes,

After watching the casket being unloaded, I find myself walking along the main avenue of Bagram Airfield. All is different. Soldiers holding candles are belting out Christmas carols. Down the street, luminaries brighten the walkway into the clamshell shaped auditorium, where groups of uniformed men and women enter for a Christmas concert. Two blocks away, the chapel is filling for the 6:00 Christmas Eve service. "War," writes C.S. Lewis in his essay *Learning in Wartime*, "reveals a hunger in human beings for joy and meaning that will not be set aside for even the most difficult of circumstances." Jesus did not come just to provide an occasion to sing carols, drink toasts, feast, and exchange gifts. But we are right to do these things even as soldiers die and families grieve because Jesus came. And in his coming, he brought joy and peace, the joy that overcomes our sorrows and the only kind of peace that ultimately matters. It's the peace of which the end of all wars, terrible as they are, is merely one token. It's the peace that means the long war between the heart and its maker is over. It's a peace treaty offered in Bethlehem and signed in blood on Calvary.

And then Lee Bishop concludes his article with these words for you and me: "So joy to the world! And do every celebrating or grieving or hurting soul in it, the Lord is come. Let Heaven and nature, and even those who stand watch with lighted candles in the land of the shadow of death, sing."

Amen. Peace has come to our crazy world. Let's sing.