

Christmas Peace

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Preacher: Jonathan de Groot

[0 : 00] Well, what do you want for Christmas? What do you want for this Christmas? And I don't mean clothes or toys or jewelry or gadgets or any other kind of gifts.

I mean, what is it that you long for? What do you long for more than anything else this Christmas? Perhaps for you or for your family, maybe for your circumstances or your work, even maybe for this world or for our nation.

One thing I reckon we all long for every year, even all through the year, but especially at Christmas time, is peace. Peace.

In the news recently, we've heard a lot about a peace plan for Israel-Gaza, a peace plan for Ukraine-Russia, and I think you'll find plenty of Christmas cards still in the shops with the word peace on them.

And that's not even just religious Christmas cards. Loads of cards have peace as their message. And it's because whether you would call yourself a Christian or even if you would simply consider yourself to be a secular person, we all want peace.

[1 : 15] This month, I don't know if you know, is the 45th anniversary of John Lennon's murder. Remember, John Lennon of the Beatles. And in 1971, John Lennon sang the song Imagine. And in it, he had these words, imagine all the people living life in peace.

So he's urging us to imagine a world where we all live in peace, where we all live as one. And it's an appealing vision, isn't it? It's one that we would all love to see, especially as we see conflict between different countries.

And even as we see conflict within our own country, peace sounds brilliant. And Lennon's answer in Imagine is no heaven, hell, countries, possessions, greed, and no religion too.

Now you may say he is a dreamer, but he's not the only one. Because this atheistic utopia might sound appealing, might sound something that we all long for, but does it actually work?

Well, no, it doesn't work, does it? He sang that song in 1971. And we're in a worse state today than we were back then. Why does it not work? Well, because our aspirations for peace will never be fully met without God.

[2 : 39] And that's why peace, peace is central to the Christian message. It's central to the Christmas message. Jesus was born to bring peace.

Earlier on in our reading from Isaiah chapter 9, Jesus is called the Prince of Peace. And you would have heard this from that Bible reading from Alana in Luke chapter 2.

In it, it's a song. There's a song sung by angels, and they are proclaiming peace on earth. Listen to their words. Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth.

Peace to those on whom his favor rests. So I'd like us this afternoon and the remainder of the time we have to think about Christmas peace.

Christmas peace. We all would like it. We all want it. And we all need it. But unlike the sentimental talk of peace that we see on cards or that comes from our lips, or even unlike the optimistic singing about peace that we hear in songs, the angels' song in Luke chapter 2 proclaims real peace, true peace, and lasting peace, because Jesus brings peace that doesn't fit with our expectations.

[4 : 00] And yet at the same time, Jesus brings peace that goes beyond our expectations. So firstly, let's look at Jesus bringing peace that doesn't fit with our expectations.

And we see this in the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth. So an angel of the Lord gave some shepherds his birth announcement, which was followed by an army of angels appearing in the night sky.

And they expressed their joy at the coming of Jesus by singing, Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.

Notice how their song goes in two directions. Upwards, as they declare glory to God in the highest, but also downwards as they proclaim peace to people on earth.

So fundamentally, Christmas is about what God does for us, which means we can never discover the true meaning of Christmas.

[5 : 02] We can never discover peace, peace in our hearts, peace in our lives, peace in our world without God. And so Jesus brings peace that isn't primarily a peace out there.

The angels weren't just singing about world peace, about international or national or political peace between different people groups. Jesus did not appear on that first Christmas to bring world peace. In fact, later in Luke's gospel, Jesus asks, Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? And then he answers his own question with this answer.

No, I tell you, but division. Now, ultimate peace will come, thankfully, but not yet. And nor were these angels singing about peace in here, a kind of psychological peace, a peace of mind, an inner peace.

Jesus didn't come to make you feel better about yourself and about your life. So what is the peace that Jesus came to bring about?

[6 : 13] Well, it's a peace between human beings, that's us, and God who made us. Because whether we realize it or not, we are alienated from God.

We are estranged from him. We are at enmity with him because of our sin. The Bible makes it clear from the very beginning and the opening pages that there is a relational breakdown between God and us.

And our default position is one where we are separated from him. Not because of him, it's not due to him, but because we have rejected God's rule over our lives.

And so we have made ourselves God's enemies. And therefore, we need peace with God. And unless we grasp this, then we miss the real meaning of Christmas.

And that's why the peace that Jesus brings doesn't fit our expectations. And so I might defiantly reject God and want nothing to do with him.

[7 : 20] Or I might just simply ignore him, thinking he is irrelevant to this world and to my life. Whatever it is, I won't be at peace with God because none of us are by nature.

And so the peace that Jesus brings is a reconciliation between us and God. Or a bit like the little boy in the nativity play who was just desperate to play Joseph.

And his teacher, instead of giving him the role of Joseph, gave him the more minor role of the innkeeper instead. And so the boy went in a huff. He wasn't happy. And he looked for an opportunity to take his revenge.

And the opportunity came on the night of the performance, when the school assembly hall was full with stressed out teachers and excited parents.

And in the nativity, Mary and Joseph approached the innkeeper with their familiar line, is there any room at the inn? And rather than say no and show them the stable, like he was supposed to, the boy took the chance to steal the show.

[8 : 30] And so instead, when they asked, is there any room at the inn? With a big smile on his face, he replied, yeah, of course, plenty room. Come on in and make yourselves at home.

Mary and Joseph had no clue what to do. And the nativity descended into chaos. Now there is something about that little boy in all of us when it comes to God.

Because if all the world's a stage, as Shakespeare said, then God is the creator, God is the writer of the play, God is the designer of the set, and God is the producer.

Which means our role is to live as he designed, recognizing his authority over our lives, so that we might follow his instructions.

And yet we're not happy with the role that he's given to us. And so we ignore his script, we make up our own lines, and we push him aside so we can take center stage.

[9 : 28] And so while the angels sang glory to God in the highest heaven, if we're honest, we would love the glory all for ourselves. And that's why we're not at peace with God.

And because God is holy and God is just, he can't just ignore our sin as if it didn't matter. It has got to be punished. And yet because God is also loving and God is gracious, then he has got a way of punishing our sin without punishing us.

So that we can be at peace with him. So how is it possible? Well, because Jesus not only brings peace that doesn't fit our expectations, Jesus also, secondly, brings peace that goes beyond our

expectations.

And we see this again in the angel's birth announcement. The angel said this to the shepherds, 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.

[10:42] And so by nature, we are not at peace with God. But the angel's message is one of good news, of great joy for all people.

Why? Because a savior has been born who is the Messiah, the Lord. So savior expresses Jesus' mission. Jesus came to save.

The Messiah expresses Jesus' title. Jesus is God's chosen king. And the Lord expresses Jesus' identity. Jesus is God.

And so all of this emphasizes to us that Jesus is able to reconcile us to God, to give us peace with God. Because there's no way, no way that we can make peace with God by ourselves.

So Jesus has come to offer peace with God. And it's a peace that goes way beyond our expectations because it is quite literally out of this world.

[11:48] Jesus left the glory of highest heaven to be born on earth as a baby. I think C.S. Lewis captures this beautifully by saying, A stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world.

And so despite the fact that we're the ones who have wronged God, God holds out the hand of peace to us, as it were. Arsene Wenger, former manager of Arsenal Football Club, I think helps explain this.

He once said, Christmas is important, but Easter is decisive. I'm pretty sure he wasn't talking about Jesus or claiming to be a great theologian.

I think he was actually talking about how Christmas time is not the time to decide whether you'll win the league. But Easter, when the league finishes and the games run out, is the time to be thinking.

But he reminds us not just to look at the cradle, but also look at the cross where Jesus died.

Not just to have all the focus on Christmas, but also to remember what happened at Easter.

Because this baby, Luke is telling us, this Savior, this Messiah, the Lord, died.

[13:06] So that we can have peace with God. Death is the punishment for sin. And so by taking on human nature, while still being God, Jesus could die to take the punishment for our sin.

And so Jesus is the perfect Savior whose death forgives our sins and brings us peace with God.

And so a real, true, lasting peace goes beyond our expectations because it comes through the death of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Charles Wesley's classic hymn, which we'll sing to end our service today, Hark the Herald Angels Sing, captures this really well in one of its most famous lines, which is peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.

And so can you see how Christmas is about God coming to us in the person of Jesus Christ to reconcile us to himself?

To bring us back into the relationship with him, which is what you and I and every human being was made for. And so God, in his love, rather than banish us from his presence forever like we deserve, offers us peace.

[14:34] And this peace, we read, comes to those on whom his favor rests. So it's a peace that comes to you and to me, not because we deserve it, not because we can earn it, but because God's favor rests on us.

So all we do is receive it, take it. God graciously makes peace with people like you and people like me.

And that's why it's a peace that goes beyond our expectations. Because none of us, none of us deserve it. You know, sadly, I think many people get God wrong and just cannot believe his sheer kindness, his sheer amazing grace towards us.

And they imagine somehow that God is just like some massive giant Santa Claus up in the sky with a massive list of who is naughty and who is nice.

And he's always checking on us just to make sure that we're being good, not being naughty. And we think, well, the more nice we are and the less naughty we are, then surely we've got more credit in our account, which means we're more acceptable to God and he'll take us.

[15:51] And so we want to make sure in life that all of the good things we do, all our good deeds, just make sure they outweigh all of our bad deeds. And yet God is not some glorified Father Christmas whose favor we have somehow got to try and earn by the stuff we do.

He's not somebody who rewards us on the basis of how good we've been. Fact is, none of us could ever be good enough anyway. Christmas tells us there is a relational breakdown between God and us.

But his favor rests on us. He shows us grace. He is kind and he is good.

Remember the angel's words, to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord, that to you was to the shepherds, of course.

But it's to all people, including you and me. And that's why responding to the good news of Jesus and his coming at Christmas causes great joy.

[17:02] Remember what the shepherds did as soon as they heard the angel's song. They said, let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about. After going to Bethlehem, they see Jesus and they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child.

And then, what do they do? The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

And so their personal response to what they had been told was to go and see and then to go and tell and then to join the angelic choir in giving glory to God.

And so if Jesus coming is not good news of great joy to you, then can I gently suggest that you have missed the point of what Christmas is all about.

Can you see how Jesus brings peace that doesn't fit our expectations? And yet at the same time, Jesus brings peace that goes way beyond our expectations.

[18:15] So how can you have this peace? It's as easy as A, B, C. We must admit we're not at peace with God because of our sin.

We must believe that God has come to save us in the person of Jesus Christ. And we must confess our sin and respond in faith to Jesus.

Have you received God's offer of peace in Jesus? Because only those who have a reconciled relationship with God through knowing Jesus Christ as their Savior, your Savior, can join the angelic choir and sing glory to God in the highest heaven.

and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests. I hope and I pray that that can be your song this Christmas.

Let's pray together. that that that