

Peace and Good Will

SERMON TEXT: Luke 2:8-16

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Dearly beloved in the Lord, our sermon's text for this night is taken from our Gospel reading, in particular the following verses:

In the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flocks 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 Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloth 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, good will toward men."

Let us pray...

*O Heavenly Father, we come before you in the name of Your beloved Son, to whom You gave the name Jesus, because You sent Him into this world to save us by bringing about true peace as You reconciled the world to Yourself through Him. By Your Holy Spirit may we ever abide in this peace as we hear of Your promise of peace and good will towards us through Your Word, Your Word made flesh this Christmas. Touch my lips, O Lord, my God, that I may speak of the wonders of Your love. Touch also the hearts of all who hear of what You've done in giving unto us Your Son. **Amen.***

Peace and good will. These are words that we often hear, as it is right to hear, at Christmas every year, but do we hear them rightly? I ask this question because we are surrounded by many voices which proclaim peace and good will this holiday season by

calling upon us to demonstrate good will toward one another and, thereby, engender peace in the world. Is *that* Christmas' message to mankind? Is *that* God's message to man? Is the message carried by the angelic herald, in the company of the heavenly host, a call for us all to get along together peacefully? It seems that that is the message many would have us hear, whether intentionally or unintentionally, at this time of year; however, if we give ear to such platitudes for peace and good will toward one another, we will ultimately fail to hear the Christmas message and fail to find any meaningful and lasting peace on earth.

Peace and good will. These *are* nice sentiments. However, that's all they are when their source is the human heart. They are powerless words when coming from the mouths of mere men. After all, just look across the ages at our collective history and what you'll find is a damning witness in which peace is, at best, only a temporary cease fire in a place where men are at war with one another and with themselves as they try to find their place in this world. The heart of the problem is the problem of the heart. Man's best efforts at peace are like sandcastles built upon the seashore: they are destined to dissolve as the tide of the sinful heart, with its successive waves, washes over them and undoes every effort. Good will, you see, requires a *good* will (and only God is good). Peace can only come from those at peace. As sinners—rebels at war with not only one another and ourselves, but also with God—we cannot know peace because of a call to peace from a Christmas card with a picture of a dove on the cover, nor can we transform our hearts by an act of the will through our donations at this time of year to the local Good Will.

Peace and good will. The world's message, at best, is but a thin broth that cannot satisfy any hunger for peace; God's message, on the other hand, is true meat upon which we can feast and be filled. That's why we are wise to revisit God's sacred Word rather than turn to secular greetings and celebrations steeped in hackneyed wishes which are the hallmark of holidays that, for too many, are no longer "holy days". In revisiting God's Word, however, we must always be prepared to encounter that which is *most* holy.

"Fear not..." Those are the first words that come forth from the angelic herald's mouth as his presence is revealed to the shepherds watching their flocks by night. They are words that are most necessary as one of God's holy messengers makes his way before men beset by sin (sin which separates all men from the holiest of all that is holy, namely, God Himself). The angel's presence is not only fearsome to behold, but to be in its presence is to be reminded of the reality that undergirds our own. The curtain is drawn back as this radiant being pierces the darkness with its presence and points the eyes of the shepherds away from their earthly surroundings to the heavenly truth that ultimately surrounds them, for, behold, with the herald angel there is the presence of the very company of the angelic host. Now, it's a shame, it's a sad shame that what transpired that night is all too often diminished by the numerous artistic renderings that appear, for example, on greeting cards. It's a shame because what is lost in translation only serves to lessen the impact of the message conveyed that night for the sake of all. So, if you will permit me, I will attempt to paint the picture for you anew with the words found in God's Word.

“Fear not...” Again, those are the words that were first uttered by the angel as the shepherds began to shake with the fear that rightly overtook them when the angel manifested itself in their midst. The angel made it clear that the message it was sent to deliver was one of good news of great joy: the message of the coming of the Messiah, the Christ, to fulfill God’s promise to the patriarchs for all people. This was the good news of God’s intention *not* to destroy the world, but to *save* mankind through the babe to be found in a manger. This news of great joy and comfort is what kept still the hearts of the shepherds— shepherds who were at first sore afraid at the sight of just *one* of God’s angels... just one. It was this good news that the herald angel proclaimed that kept their hearts still as the veil between this world and the greater reality behind it was momentarily lifted to reveal a multitude of angels far too many to count. Yes, this must have been a most awesome and terrifying sight to behold because, again, as you’ll recall, at the sight of the first angel alone, they were sore afraid... and now, there was a vast array of such creatures set before them. However, given how angels are often portrayed, the scene described in our Gospel’s text fails to truly touch us. Unfortunately, what we’ve come to call cherubs, those plump winged-babies that you often see portrayed on paintings and greeting cards, actually bear no resemblance whatsoever to what the Scriptures speak of when they make mention of cherubim and seraphim. No, for you see, the common depiction of such creatures is actually based upon the Greco-Roman mythological depiction of Cupid’s cohorts, which are properly known as *putti*. So, *why* would the shepherds respond with fear and dread at the sight of creatures so cute that you’d just want to pinch their chubby little cheeks? After all, if that’s what the shepherds

saw, then what made them sore afraid? Did they fear that the *putti* weren't potty-trained and that they'd have to change the diapers of such a multitude (after all, that's a pretty scary thought)? No, of course not. Oh, wait, I know, maybe they were surrounded by effeminate looking winged-beings in long flowing robes of bright white brandishing harps of gold? Perhaps that's what struck their hearts with great fear? No, no that's not what the Bible describes either. What they saw that night would ultimately bring the strongest among us to our knees as our legs buckled beneath us. What they saw that night were the very *armies* of heaven standing at the ready.

To put what the shepherds saw into proper perspective, let me remind you of the fact that just one angel— *one* angel— in *one* night put to death over 185,000 Assyrian soldiers. One angel in one night... and this particular event is recorded *three* times in *three* different books of the Bible. So, perhaps we ought to take notice. That was just one angel. Before the eyes of the shepherds, the heavens were shown to be filled with such beings— beings that have been there from the very beginning, and, from there will one day descend upon us! Nothing will be able to keep them at bay on that day, the Day of the Lord, the day of God's judgement. However, that Christmas was not that day; rather, that night, God's amnesty, His proclamation of good will towards all mankind and His declaration of peace through the sending of a Saviour was set before them... and now before us. What was always there behind the scenes was now seen. The immanent threat to all mankind, sinners who stand opposed to God (a God who is holy and just), is revealed as the fabric of reality is drawn back. The shepherds would have made a connection which we often miss even though we use the terminology in the Sanctus of

our Divine Service. We sing, “Holy, holy, holy Lord God of Sabaoth,” recalling that God is powerful and mighty; and therefore, we also sing our hearts cry of “Hosanna” (which means, “save us now”) for we know that apart from God Himself there is no one who can hold back His hand. The word “sabaoth” in the title, “Lord God of Sabaoth,” is an anglicized form of the Hebrew word *tzva’ot*, which means “hosts” in a military sense, in the sense of an army. This word appears many times, in connection with God’s name, throughout what we call the Old Testament. Now, while the shepherds, through many of the readings that were read aloud in the synagogues every week, would’ve heard of God being referred to as *Adonai Tzva’ot*, that is, the LORD of Heaven’s Armies, nothing could’ve prepared them for what they saw that night. What they had heard about and perhaps attempted to envision through the use of their imaginations could never do justice to the sight set before them. We too cannot do justice to the text through our own imaginations either. Nevertheless, we must turn to our text alone to possess a proper perspective concerning the events described.

The shepherds, being Jews, would have been familiar with the significance of the title “The LORD of Heaven’s Armies”, “The LORD of Hosts”, and they would have recognized the fact that the word LORD, *Adonai* in the Hebrew, was regularly used in the place of the name of God—the name that no Jew would ever attempt to pronounce, out of reverence to the Almighty. They heard the word *Adonai*, Lord, used by the herald angel just before they saw the company of heaven revealed; and therefore, I can’t help but wonder if they caught what many people today— those who think of Jesus as just a “good man” with a message of peace— miss altogether: the herald angel, the one who

appeared prior to the revealing of the armies of heaven, said that the Saviour at the centre of God's good news was "Christ *the LORD*". *Mashiach Adonai*! In other words, the babe wrapped in swaddling cloth and lying in a manger in Bethlehem, the city of David, was none other than the very captain of the host! Glory to God in the highest! The angelic message was not that a creature was coming among us, a creature like it and the rest of them, but the very Creator of all that has ever been, is, or will be created was coming among us as one of us! Glory to God in the highest! Glory to God in the highest for He Himself came to make peace with His people on earth!

God did not send us an angel to save us for, as powerful as such creatures are, they are just creatures that were spoken into existence like the world around us. No, God, the Father, sent His Son, His Word, by the power of His Holy Spirit, to save the very world He made and the sinful creatures— that's us— that once bore His image and likeness. The Word of God who was in the beginning with God came among the things that were made through Him as one of them so as to bring us peace as a gift of grace. St. John writes that, "The Word was made flesh and *tabernacled* among us," so as to draw us to recall the time of His presence in the midst of His people, when He drew them out of bondage in Egypt and brought them into the promised land (a land that had to be seen to be believed); however, in this new tabernacle of flesh, the babe in the manger came to set us free from a power far greater than Pharaoh, the power of sin, death, and the Devil so as to bring us safely home into a far superior land of promise (a land that needs to be believed to be seen). In St. John's Gospel we read, "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through

Him.” This is the Christmas message of peace and good will. It is God’s proclamation of peace towards us and of His good and gracious will to save us from our sins. He did not come, as He easily could have, with the armies of heaven and in power— believe me, that day will come soon enough when the Son returns to judge the world in justice! No, no, He did not come with power, but in weakness as a baby. What is weaker than a baby? How about a man nailed to pieces of wood? That time too would come because that is why He came: He came to die for our sins so that we might live, without fear, knowing peace with God. The birth of the Prince of Peace, who is ready to receive us all into His kingdom with amnesty, is what we celebrate and commemorate this evening, tomorrow, throughout this season, and, I pray, always. He has called us to know peace with Him as He receives us with arms wide open for it is His will that, as it is written, “none should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” Peace and good will expressed by God towards us: this is why we make merry *this* Christmas, and always, through Christ the Lord, our Saviour. This gift of peace with God is what we take home with us this day. It is a gift we unwrap in the knowledge that His will for us is for our good. Glory to God in the highest! Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, God’s good will towards you, towards me, and towards all men. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.