

Peace!

Four Gifts of Christmas:

Luke 2:8-14

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Bethany Church

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How do you define peace when your son is practicing his guitar, your nephew is trying the drums, toddlers are chasing one another, your uncle is hunting for his teeth and your wife is pointing to a mess of china shattered on the floor? What constitutes peace? Certainly, the holiday environment with gatherings can be fun, celebrative, bonding, even inspiring, but not necessarily quiet and restoring. It can leave you exhausted and spent (with a double meaning). There is a difference between peace and peaceful, isn't there? Peaceful is not necessarily peace either. The quiet can be sad, lonely, wistful, or it can be tense and foreboding.

There is a commercial where a girl spells out with a drawl the technical specifications of some high definition television and then says, "*I don't know what that means, but I want it.*" Is that where we are with peace? "I don't know what it means, but I want it?"

In 2004, the movie Hotel Rwanda revealed the horror of civil unrest, ethnic cleansing and human suffering that ravaged the small African nation, later visited Serbia and Croatia, and now plagues Darfur. For these people the rush of the holiday season is not antithetical to peace. Peace is the freedom to live without the fear that they or their loved ones will face a violent end.

In the counseling room, peace warms a heart that is no longer ruled or invaded by memories that once carried heaps of pain or fear; or peace brightens a couple who resolves a conflict and starts down a path of restoration.

When we think of the awesome gifts God offers you and me in Christmas, and they are awesome, we've considered God's promise to us, God's purpose for us, God's presence with us; but what the angels announced to the shepherds was this:

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.
(Luke 2:14, NIV)

They celebrated what was happening to both God and men (or humanity). They revealed what was happening "in the highest" and "on earth." In response to the birth of Jesus, they declared "Glory to God in the highest," and they followed, "on earth peace to men."

Think of "*glory*". Is it not the grasp and appreciation of the nature of something or someone? It's not them; it reveals them. Like the improbable victories of a warrior, or the unfathomable discoveries of a researcher, or the magnificent detail of an artist, or the unblemished fruit of a gardener, it heralds something about a person. When Jesus was born, something was revealed about God to all who see his heavenly majesty. They learned about his love and wisdom, his goodness and his greatness. All this was observed when Jesus was born: "***Glory to God in the highest.***"

However, Jesus' birth was not primarily about glory to God. It accomplished that by its very nature. No, the birth of Jesus was about the gift of peace to you, me and the human family. To be certain, some wonder if this peace is for a select people, "***men on whom his favor rests.***" True, Jesus was the seed of Abraham and descended from the line of David. However, he was born to peasants, not royalty. He was born in a habitat for animals, not humanity. The announcement was given to shepherds, not priests, prophets, rulers or rich; and a star guided people from other nations to God's gift. Jesus was not the peace of Israel alone. He was and is the peace for all. Jesus would later say, "***For God so loved the world*** (not merely a part of it),

that he gave his only begotten Son.” This gift of peace was meant for all humanity, for God’s heart or favor encompasses all. As the Psalmist wrote:

The Lord is righteous in all his ways and loving toward all he has made. (Psalm 145:17, NIV)

“*Loving toward all*” means favor to all, and thus peace is for all humanity, for the tormented society and the tortured soul. It is for the person suffering conflict and the one overloaded with activity; but it is not a state imposed. Peace does not come on a serving platter where it is carved up and passed around.

At the birth of his son John, Zechariah spoke in prophecy about Christmas. He said:

Because of God's tender mercy, the light from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace. (Luke 1:78-79, NLT)

These words were not merely spoken over baby John the Baptist. They were not merely given to those participating in John’s dedication. They were recorded for you and me. Peace is not a product to buy; rather it is a path to walk. It is not a restorative gene absent from human creation; it is a way hidden by death’s shadow. It is a highway hidden in the confusion caused by sinful thinking and actions. Humanity’s sin and sentence casts a deep shadow over its people so that it is difficult to see.

The Prophet Isaiah wrote about how, when we sin, we walk a road of destruction and pain. We walk away from God and his answers to our prayers. We walk into darkness and thus away from truth and justice. Speaking of all sinners, Isaiah declares:

Their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity, devastation and destruction are in their highways. They do not know the way of peace, and there is no justice in their tracks; they have made their paths crooked, whoever treads on them does not know peace. (Isaiah 59:7-8, NASU)

We sin because we think wrongly. When we speak our minds, do our minds include loving thoughts for the people we speak to? If they don't, how can there be peace? If they don't, how are they affected by Christ? When we react to hurt, do we react with a trust in the awesome and inevitable justice of God? Jesus did. Wouldn't his Spirit counsel us in that trust and produce it in us? The prophet noted that whoever follows paths of sin ends up lacking peace.

You don't have to be an eloquent communicator to have peace in your relationships. You don't have to be a clever negotiator to be a peacemaker. You don't have to be a brilliant logician to know peace. Peace is a gift in the person of Jesus Christ. In this relationship, which involves your heart, you think differently, believe differently, act differently and walk differently. You begin to recognize your placement in a noisy house bustling with activity and in a kitchen with shattered china even as Jesus was placed in Bethlehem, in a stable, in a manger. You begin to realize that you have a redemptive calling in a world that is hurting from not following your Heavenly Father. Jesus is your way of life. He is your inspiration and touchstone for measuring thinking and doing. He is your comfort and counsel. He is God's promise, purpose, presence and peace given to you. All of God's love, all of God's favor, all of God's personhood is with you in him.

As you celebrate tonight, tomorrow, and the remainder of these holidays, let the celebrations help you *understand, unwrap and utilize* God's personal gift to you. Let Jesus comfort and reassure you. Let him forgive and counsel you. Let him affirm you. Let him appear to you in the thousands of ways he is reaching out to you in this season.

All heaven is observing the glory of God as the Spirit of Jesus finds a welcome home in your heart and mind:

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests!