

I'm planning two Christmas sermons this year, this morning and next week in the morning service. In the afternoon services I will complete the series on Elijah. Then in the new year we will begin two new series.

I chose to preach on Luke 2:14 this morning because it a wonderful celebration of the birth of our Saviour. I chose to preach on just one text instead of the whole passage because I wanted to have the time to dwell on the three ideas of this text rather than having to skim through the whole passage.

The birth of Jesus Christ. An event worthy of worship and celebration and meditation. One of the most significant events in the history of the world. Without it there would be no salvation. No hope. Only a fearful expectation of judgment. The comic significance of the birth of Christ is indicated by the fact that it was announced by an angel from heaven and celebrated by a multitude of heavenly host. There were other births that were announced by an angel, but it is only in connection with the birth of Christ that we are told of "a multitude of heavenly host praising God." And what they said is what we will dwell on this morning. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased."

The birth of Christ was event that caused the angels to praise God and attribute glory to God. Of course, the inhabitants of heaven are always singing to God's glory. There is a lot to sing about when it comes to God's glory.

Among the quotes that I have collected over the years is this one written by Brian Borgman in his book *Feelings and Faith*. "The command to praise is a righteous command because God is the most infinitely valuable person in the whole universe, and not to praise him would be cosmic treason and a moral violation of the highest good." At the heart of the moral structure of the universe is the fact that glorifying God is the highest good. God is so good and great that the essence of goodness for created creatures is to praise and glorify God and conversely the essence of evil is failure to give to God the praise of which he is so absolutely worthy. The unfallen angels do that perfectly. And when Jesus was born it is as if the praise of God swelled in its volume and enthusiasm and this particular multitude of heavenly host burst from heaven to celebrate the birth of Jesus - to give an indication to the human race that the birth of Jesus was an unprecedented manifestation of the glory of God.

And very significantly, other than the angelic choir, there was nothing outwardly spectacular about the birth of Jesus. The account emphasizes the humble circumstances of Jesus' birth. Mary and Joseph were ordinary people. They were probably not overly poor if Joseph was a carpenter, but they were certainly not overly significant among the people who had travelled to Bethlehem to be registered. No one was asked to give up their space in the inn to make room for them. Even though Mary was very pregnant, and the labor pains had begun, all the innkeepers felt they had no choice but to refuse them a room. And so Jesus was born in a barn or a cave – a shelter for cattle. His crib was a manger.

All this to emphasize the humble surroundings of his birth. We are meant to see the contrast between the humble circumstances of his birth and its unspeakably great significance. It is very interesting to consider humble circumstances of Jesus' birth and how it provoked the angels to sing, "Glory to God in the highest." The angels saw something of which there was no indication in what was visible to human observation. By all outward appearances Jesus' birth was ordinary and on the humble side of ordinary. And yet this birth was a particularly significant manifestation of the glory of God.

God certainly has his own ideas about what brings him glory. Of course, God can sometimes manifest his glory in spectacular ways. Just think of the awesome display of God's glory on Mount Sinai. Psalm 145 speaks of David meditating on "the glorious splendor of [God's] majesty." Paul in 1 Timothy 6:16 says that God "dwells in unapproachable light." But that kind display of glory was not visible when Jesus was born. Contrary to the testimony of countless Christmas cards and nativity scenes, the baby Jesus did not have a halo. He did not shine with a heavenly light. All was not calm. All was not bright round yon virgin mother and child. There were no radiant beams from his holy face.

The biblical description of his birth emphasizes its humble circumstances. The visible glory was the glory of the Lord that attended the angels. There was no visible glory in the stable. It was on the poor side of ordinary as far as what was visible. That is the point of the story. And that is a huge part of the glory of the birth of Christ.

It was the angels that told us of the glory of the scene. And they sang of God's glory exactly because the humble circumstance of Jesus' birth was an awesome manifestation of God's glory. Jesus himself gives us an insight into the glory of his humble birth when he later says to his disciples in Matthew 20:26-27, "But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

This is why the angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest...." It is because Jesus' birth was the greatest possible act of humbling of himself in order to serve the most unworthy of recipients of his service. It is because the Creator of the universe humbled himself to serve those who had rejected his loving rule over them. The glory here is in the humility of the Son of God. As the church would later sing, "[T]hough he was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men." (Philippians 2:6-7)

The glory here is precisely in the lack of visible glory. The glory here is exactly in the lowly circumstances. To picture Jesus with a halo is exactly to miss the point. The glory here is in the humiliation. It is in the fact that externally this birth was no different than any other birth except that it was in poorer circumstances than most. The glory of Jesus' birth was in the fact that he did not shine with a heavenly light. It is in the fact that the Creator became a creature and more than that a servant of his human creatures and more than that a servant of his human creatures whose goal in life was to tear him from his throne and sit on it themselves. The

glory here – the reason that the angels sang, “Glory to God in the highest,” was that God humbled himself – he came not to be served but to serve. That is the most awesome thing that the universe has ever seen.

And this is at the very heart of the biblical way of understanding the world. The world was made by God and what is great and what is not great is a reflection of who God is. What is good and what is not good is built into the very fabric of the creation. And the glory of the birth of Jesus is a reflection of the nature of things in God’s world which means it is a reflection of the very nature of God.

This goes back to what Jesus said about true greatness. Greatness is serving. The truly great in God’s world are people who serve others. This is why the angels sang “Glory to God in the highest” exactly because there was nothing outwardly glorious about Jesus’ birth. It is because what counts as glorious in God’s world is not simply outward glory, but love. There is an outward glory of God, as we have seen. But what makes God glorious is not simply his majesty and his splendor and his power, but the fact that his outward glory is wedded to love.

Think of it. God’s power is amazing. Think of the fact that he created this vast cosmos by speaking. Think of the fact that he holds all things in existence from moment to moment by his power. God is almighty and that is awesome. But imagine power without love. That is terrifying. That is frightening. And it is evil. Power without love is selfish power. And that is not glorious. It is why the world is in the mess that it is. But the reason that God is good is that he is both powerful and loving. That is why he is glorious. And that is why the angels sang as they had never sung before, “Glory to God in the highest.” The birth of Jesus was the all-powerful one, laying aside his power and humbling himself to become a servant of the very people who wanted nothing more than to overthrow his reign and place themselves on the throne.

And this of course has profound implications for our lives. What is true greatness? It is service. It is putting the other before one’s self. It is not grasping for outward glory, but taking the form of a servant. Which is why Paul wrote in Philippians 2:5 “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus....” And give glory to God that he was willing to be born in a barn – to give up all visible glory – so that he could become a servant and give his life a ransom for many.

And all of this is intimately related to what he came to do. Jesus came to bring peace on earth among those with whom he is pleased. Jesus’ mission was to bring peace on earth. This is one of the ways of summing up the whole message to the Bible. The Bible is about peace. There was peace before Adam sinned. Peace was lost when Adam sinned. What is very conspicuous about the world, as it is now, is the lack of peace. Jesus came to restore peace. We experience a beginning of that when we believe and in the life of the church. And the new heavens and new earth will know perfect peace.

Peace in the Bible is a very broad thing. It is more than the absence of conflict. It is more than the absence of unrest. It is those things, but it is much more. It is fullness of life. It is comprehensive wellbeing of soul and

body. Edward Welch writes of peace, “Jammed into this one word is everything good. Peace, harmony, contentment, freedom, completeness, well-being, prosperity, health, safety, love. Nothing that blesses a life is missing. (*Running Scared*, p. 279)

That is what Jesus came to bring. Jesus became a servant to bring peace to the world.

Now the world longs of peace. You don’t have to be a Christian to long for peace. Think of how the world searches for harmony, contentment, freedom, completeness, well-being, prosperity, health, safety and love. Think of how much effort is put into ending the scourge of war and poverty and sickness, and interpersonal conflict and psychological pain. Vast resources of time and money and effort are put into the search for peace at many different levels. And yet it is illusive. There are smidgens of peace here and there, but in large measure peace is conspicuous by its absence.

The Bible tells us why. In Isaiah 48:18, God said to Israel, “Oh that you had paid attention to my commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river....” God is saying to Israel that if they had paid attention to his commandments they would have been swimming in peace. Their lives would be a river of harmony, contentment, freedom, completeness, wellbeing, prosperity, health, safety and love. In verse 22 of the same chapter, God says, “‘There is no peace,’ says the LORD, ‘for the wicked.’”

This is built into the structure of the creation. Peace is rooted in loving God and keeping his commands. Wellbeing is rooted in loving God and keeping his commands. Contentment is rooted in loving God and keeping his commands. We see that in the early chapters of Genesis. There was peace before the fall. And the moment Adam and Eve sinned, peace was gone. They were alienated from one another. They were alienated from the creation. Cain killed Abel. And the story of life on earth is one of “un-peace.” Inner peace is illusive. Peace in relationships is hard to fine. People are fighting all the time. Nation rises up against nation. There is not a complete absence of peace because of God’s common grace, but the lack of peace is a constant characteristic of life on earth.

This is the context for the song of the angels. “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.” This is the meaning of the birth of Jesus. In the birth of Jesus, the creator became a servant in order to bring peace to a world which had lost it by the fall of mankind into sin. Jesus came to fix a broken world. Jesus came to restore peace.

And the way he did it was to reconcile God and man. God and sinners reconciled. That is at the very heart of peace – harmony, contentment, freedom, completeness, wellbeing, prosperity, health, safety and love. Harmony between God and man is the absolute necessity for peace. We are created for a relationship with God. And that relationship with God determines our relationship with everyone and everything else. In relationship with God we love – we are other-centered. Outside of a loving relationship with God we are self-centered. And being self-centered makes peace impossible. To say that Jesus came to bring peace on earth is

to say that Jesus came to restore our relationship to God. Peace with God translates into peace on earth. Alienation from God translates into the removal of peace on earth.

This is why Jesus was born. This why the angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased." In order to bring peace, Jesus had to make sin go away. Jesus had to undo what Adam and Eve did when they disobeyed God. Jesus had to remove the curse of sin. Sin is separation. It is separation from God. It is separation between people. It is disharmony. Love unites. Sin separates.

Jesus came to make sin go away. He did that by living a life without sin. He did that by suffering the penalty that sin requires. He did it by perfectly keeping the law. And he did it by dying the death that is the penalty for sin. Jesus was a representative person, just as Adam was a representative person. That is why his perfect life makes a difference for his people. That is why his death on the cross paid the penalty for the sins of his people. What Jesus did by his life and his death removed the consequences of sin from his people and it will completely remove the power of sin from their lives as well.

Jesus came to fulfill the law. Jesus came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. Jesus came that we might have abundant life. Jesus came so that we might have peace.

We can think of peace in a number of ways because it is such a broad idea. Because of what Jesus accomplished by his life and death those who believe in him have peace with God. Romans 5;1 "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." This is an objective peace. We are reconciled to God. God is no longer angry with us. There is harmony between God and us. He loves us and we love him. By living a life of obedience in our place and by paying the penalty for our sins, Jesus removed what separates us from God so that we are reconciled.

But peace is also a subjective reality in the lives of God's people. We can know peace in our hearts because of the peace that exists between God and us. In Romans 15:13 Paul writes, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing...." One of the great disrupters of our peace is our guilty consciences. A guilty conscience is a painful thing. We know that we have done wrong. We know that our sin is displeasing to God. Guilt is a heavy thing. It weighs us down. But we can have peace in our hearts because of Jesus. He took our guilt upon him. He exhausted its penalty. He lived the life that we owe to God. Our record is perfect. It is as if we had never sinned. It is as if we had always obeyed. God is pleased with us because we are sinless in his sight. When he speaks to us he says, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

This registers in our consciences. Our consciences can be clear. Hebrews 9:14 says that "the blood of Christ ... [purifies] our conscience..." The blood of bull and goats did not purify the consciences of OT believers because they knew that the blood of bulls and goats did not actually take away sins, but Jesus' blood did actually take away our sins so that we can have clear consciences. That is peace.

There is also a peace that comes from knowing that God is our God and is committed to working everything in our lives to our good. Paul writes in Philippians 4:6-7, “[D]o not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Romans 8:31-32 says, “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” If we really understand what that means and if we really rest in this assurance, we can have peace in our hearts even though we are vulnerable to all kinds of hard things. God is for us. He gave us Jesus. He will not give us anything that is harmful for our greatest good. It may be painful, but it will not be harmful. It will all be for our good. And if we rest in that assurance we can have peace.

But peace is bigger than our personal relationship with the Lord and with our inner experience of peace. It affects our relationships because the Holy Spirit is rooting our sin from our lives. Sin causes separation. Obedience leads to peace. Obedience is love and it brings harmony. We are being conformed to the image of Christ, so we are learning to overcome our selfishness. We are learning to serve one another in love. The church is the display of the peace that Jesus came to bring. It is not yet perfect, but there is a beginning and Jesus is at work in his people enabling them to live together in peace. Paul writes in Romans 15:13 that “the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” And so he exhorts us in verse 19 of the same chapter, “So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.” Galatians 5:22, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness...”

But the peace that Jesus came to bring is bigger yet. It will one day be cosmic. It will one day fill the whole world. Isaiah 9:6-7, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore.” The kingdom of God is a kingdom of peace and when it comes in its fullness there will be peace on earth forevermore.

But that peace is not for everyone. The song of the angels speaks of “peace among those with whom he is pleased.” The ESV Study Bible interprets: “God’s gift of ‘peace’ will not come to all humanity but to those whom God is pleased to call to himself.” According to another commentator, “The phrase means ‘those upon whom God’s will/favor rests’, and it expresses the thought of God’s free choice of those whom he wills to favour and save.” (Marshall, p.112)

This is actually an election text. The peace that Jesus came to bring is for those whom God has chosen to save. They are the ones God has chosen in Christ “before the foundation of the world.” (Ephesians 2:3) But that is

not limiting in any way because the good news is that whoever will receive the peace through believing in Jesus shall receive it. God's favour rests on those whom he has chosen, but the way to know that you are chosen is to believe in Jesus.

But the peace is not for those who refuse Jesus. Jesus did not only come to bring salvation. He also came to defeat the kingdom of Satan. The peace that Jesus came to bring requires a conquest to achieve, as the Bible makes very clear. And so the gospel message comes with a warning. Jesus said of the Pharisees, "you refuse to come to me that you may have life."

The peace that Jesus came to bring is offered to all who hear the gospel, but it is given only to those who believe in Jesus and follow him. Those who refuse Jesus will never know the peace that Jesus came to bring. One of the characteristics of hell will be the absence of peace. Inner and outer anguish forever.

But for all who receive Jesus and trust in him – Jesus says in John 14:27, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." And that the heart of that peace is the favor of God. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased."

There is nothing like knowing that God is pleased with us. This is at the heart of joy and satisfaction and fullness of life. Knowing that God is pleased with us – even as we still sin – because of Jesus and what he came on earth to do. And having even a beginning of that knowledge of God's favor is the greatest motivation for us to join the angels in their song, "Glory to God in the highest...."