

MESSAGES from LIBERTY

“THE GIFTS OF CHRISTMAS”

2. Peace

(Luke 1:76-79)

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We’re here this morning, in this place, because we believe in God. But if you’re like me, even while you believe, your faith still struggles with a few “yeah, buts”.

Yeah, buts. “I believe that God created the world.” We all believe that. *Yeah, but* so much of the research on DNA and genomes suggest that life on earth is self-explanatory.

“I believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead on Easter morning.” We all believe that. *Yeah, but* I can’t honestly say that I see a whole lot of “resurrection-type life” exhibited in the world around me, or in the world within me for that matter.

“I believe that God came into the world at Christmas.” We wouldn’t be here this morning if we didn’t believe that. *Yeah, but* there was a whole lot of other stuff going on that day, that the church school children will so ably act out for us next Sunday, things that I wouldn’t typically believe if a friend came up to me and told me about angels and guiding stars and virgin births.

We believe, but even our strongest beliefs come with “*yeah, buts*”.

And then we look at this Advent Wreath, whose candles proclaim the gifts of Christmas: hope, peace, love and joy. Hope, peace, love and joy – these are things we all believe in, things that we *want* to believe in, things we *need* to believe in. But, if you’re like me, your belief is shadowed by a “*yeah, but*”.

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Our Scripture passage this morning comes from the first chapter of *The Gospel of Luke*. Whereas *Matthew*’s version of the Christmas story begins with Joseph and Mary, *Luke* starts further back, with the parallel story of the birth of Jesus’ forerunner – John the Baptist.

Unlike Joseph and Mary, John the Baptist’s parents aren’t a young, newly engaged couple. Zechariah and Elizabeth are old, way past the age of having children. In fact, they’ve never been able to conceive children.

Then one day, when Zechariah is fulfilling his job as a priest in the Temple in Jerusalem, an angel appears to him, announces that Elizabeth will become pregnant by God’s grace, and that their son will grow up to be “great in the sight of the Lord.” Now, this is a lot for Zechariah to swallow, given his and Elizabeth’s ages, given that Zechariah has long ago stopped praying for children, and given that he’s never seen an angel before. And so, Zechariah responds to the angel with his own, “Yeah, but.” And the angel strikes him dumb.

Nine months pass, the miracle baby is born, and finally Zechariah’s lips are opened, and he lets loose with a classic psalm of praise, praising God for His faithfulness and thanking God that right now, in the events surrounding the birth of his son, God is acting decisively to save His people.

And then Zechariah turns and looks at his new son, and he delivers a prophecy. Listen to God's Word from *Luke*, chapter 1:

*“And you, my little son,
will be called the prophet of the Most High,
because you will prepare the way for the Lord.
You will tell his people how to find salvation
through forgiveness of their sins.
Because of God's tender mercy,
the morning 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 into the path of peace.”*

The prophecy focuses on John the Baptist's calling, “to prepare the way for the Lord.” But then Zechariah's prophecy looks past John to focus on the next miracle baby, who will “give light to those who live in darkness ... and guide us into the path of peace.”

* * *

“He will guide us into the path of peace.” Peace. All of us are looking for peace. Peace is one of the great gifts of Christmas.

But we need to be clear about what kind of peace we're looking for. Certainly, the peace candle on the Advent Wreath is more than a visual aid to help us conjure up a nostalgic holiday “mellow”. Hopefully the peace candle represents more than the peaceful feeling that comes with the thought of several inches of new fallen snow.

What kind of peace are we talking about? Well, there are a lot of places we would love to see some peace: peace in Afghanistan, peace in Syria, peace in Hong Kong, peace between Israel and the Palestinians, peace in a world of terrorism. And we'd also like to see some peace closer in – peace in our relationships, peace at our job, peace about our future. Is that why we've lit the peace candle this morning, as a prayer for peace between nations, peace in our families, an experience of inner peace?

Here's the problem: if this is the kind of Christmas peace we're looking for, then we'll be hounded by a host of “yeah, buts”. Because we don't see or experience these kinds of peace very often. Because in our world, conflict and anxiety are the norm – there will always be wars; there will also be tension in some of our relationships; we will always worry.

No. To understand the Christmas gift of peace, we need to take literally, like fundamentalists, the context of the peace candle. Because this isn't any candle, and this isn't any peace. You see, the peace candle sits on an Advent Wreath, which means it's a peace that's anchored to a specific event, to the decisive and unparalleled in-breaking of God's peace into the world. And to make this even clearer, the peace candle and its fellow candles of hope, love and joy are all arranged around the center white candle, the Christ candle, from which they all derive their meaning – it's a peace that centered on Jesus Christ. You see, when we light the peace candle, we're not talking about temporary peace or secular peace or psychic peace – we're talking about the peace of God which came to life in Jesus Christ at Christmas.

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The peace of God which came to life in Jesus Christ at Christmas. Throughout the Bible, we learn about this kind of peace.

The fundamental Biblical promise of peace is the promise of “shalom”, which means so much more than the cessation of conflict, but indicates health and prosperity and reconciliation and wholeness – well-being in the widest sense of the word, a peace that far exceeds our expectations and experiences. Jesus talked about this peace on his last night with his disciples: “I am leaving you with a gift – peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift that world cannot give. So, don’t be troubled or afraid.”¹

In the same way, the Apostle Paul writes that God’s peace “exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.”²

Most specifically, the Bible teaches that peace is, in the end, neither a concept in our heads nor an experience in our hearts, but true peace is the very incarnation of God among us. As the prophet Micah predicted, in the Old Testament passage read earlier this morning, “From you, Bethlehem, shall come forth one who is to rule in Israel ... He will stand to lead his flock with the Lord’s strength ... And he will be their peace.”³

Jesus Christ himself is our peace. In other words, the Christmas gift of peace is a different kind of peace, a peace not threatened by “yeah, buts” because it is the peace established at Christmas, the peace of God which passes all understanding, God’s *shalom* of wholeness and reconciliation, the peace of Jesus Christ who *is* our peace.

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So, how do we discover this peace?

First, discovering the peace of Christ involves an act of faith. It’s the gift to believe *in* peace, and to believe *with* peace, because it’s the belief that God’s got the whole world in His hands. That amid the sad and tragic events in life, this remains God’s world, and God remains in charge. That in the midst of the confusion of our day-to-day living, God is working sovereignly to establish peace.

To discover this peace requires an act of faith – it can’t be proven, it can’t be demonstrated by pointing to events in the world or experiences in our lives. No. The Christmas gift of peace is the core belief that this world belongs to God, a fundamental orientation that no “yeah, but” can shake.

Second, discovering the peace of Christ involves a personal commitment, a personal commitment to living our lives following Jesus as he “guides us into the path of peace.”

You see, discovering the Christmas gift of peace is something we *do*, not something we simply *know*. We don’t discover Christ’s peace as a truth that we simply acknowledge and then file away

¹ John 14:27.

² Philippians 4:7

³ Micah 5:2, 4-5

to use later during a time when we're anxious or afraid or threatened. No. We discover the peace of Jesus Christ by living in the style of Jesus Christ, whose style was never peace through force, or even peace through strength, but peace through love, and service, and humility, and self-denial, and self-giving – peace that is won on a cross.

John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, prophesied that Jesus would "guide us into the path of peace." Here's the image that comes to my mind. It makes me think of a dance class, a dance class for a really clumsy student, who has no natural rhythm, who doesn't know the steps, who is too mechanical to *follow* the music, much less to *feel* the music, much less to be *guided* by the music. This student needs a teacher, a teacher who has already mastered the steps so that he can guide the student's feet across the floor.

We are that student. We don't know how to live *in* peace or how to live *out* peace. We are the ones who have no inner compass towards peace, but who need to be taken by the hand and, step by step, be guided into the path of peace. And there's no "yeah, but" that excuses any of us from the call to walk in the steps of the Prince of Peace.

And finally, discovering the peace of Christ means embracing the good news of Christmas. Because the message of Christmas is that peace in this world is not way down on God's "to do" list, but that God has committed Himself to restoring earth to the peace and wholeness and *shalom* of God's original creation. Because the good news of Christmas tells us that God entered into our world completely, from the inside out, becoming one *with* us by becoming one *of* us. And there isn't any "yeah, but" that can stand against that.

* * *

Friends, today we lit the candle of peace. We didn't light it as part of the Christmas decorations. We didn't light it as a silent protest against the conflicts that surround us. And we didn't light it because "it's better to light one candle than to curse the darkness."

No. This candle has been lit as a witness. It has been lit to give quiet but clear testimony to the gift of the peace of Jesus Christ:

- The peace of Christ discovered in the belief that this turbulent world nonetheless, and always, belongs to God.
- The peace of Christ discovered through our personal commitment to live in the way of Jesus Christ, letting him "guide us into the path of peace."
- And the peace of Christ discovered in fully embracing the good news of Christmas, that on Christmas Day God came all the way for us.

Because that's good news. AMEN

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