

Christmas Day: The Path of Peace

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

25 December, 2023

Children's Talk: Lying in a Manger

Where do you think you are most likely to find a baby? In a bed, in a pram, in a crib, in a play room, in a home, in its mother's arms.

But when Jesus was born, He was not put into any of those things. Listen to where the shepherds were told they would find the new-born baby Jesus.

Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, 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, goodwill toward men!"

So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. (Luke 2:8-16)

Where were they told they would find the baby Jesus? In a manger! I want you all to stand up and gather around the manger. A manger is for feeding animals, not for putting babies into. Why do you think Mary and Joseph put the baby into a manger? They had nowhere else to put Him! But even though it was unusual, they made Jesus comfortable with cloth wrapped around Him, and nestled in the straw.

Even though He is in a rough manger with only hay for a bed, think of how peaceful and calm He would be. Think how special any baby is, no matter where they are put, no matter where they are found. It's not about the place, it's about how special He was.

And that's something that makes the Lord so special: no matter where you are, or who you are, or what is going on around you, the Lord comes to you with

love, and peace, and calm. If your parents are upset, the Lord can still be there. If you are scared, the Lord can still be there. If you are overwhelmed by all the noise and chaos around you, the Lord can still be there. If you have just done something bad and regret it, the Lord can still be there.

Mary and Joseph didn't have anywhere usual to put the baby Lord; but no matter where they were, the Lord found a place for Himself, and could be there, with all of His love.

The Path of Peace

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When the Lord was born the angels proclaimed, “on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” Here we are, over two-thousand years later. Yet has that promise been fulfilled? If we look at our world do we find peace and goodwill reigning over all? Not really. There is violence abroad, and violence at home. There is corruption and crime and all manner of ill-will. We might look at the world in contrast with the promise of that first Christmas and despair. But there are things that we can do to fulfill the promise of peace, ways that we can become channels of peace in this world, from within. Now in looking at peace from this angle I in no way want to downplay the real-world conflicts. Things are bad in a lot of ways, and there need to be people willing to find solutions and make a difference. But the foundation of peace must be built on spiritual peace, and that is something in which we all have a part to play. There are things we can do here and now to find true peace on Earth.

The Christmas story is often connected with the concept of peace, based on that angelic proclamation that I just shared: peace on Earth, goodwill toward men! But in the Gospel of Luke there are three instances of the word “peace.” One is before the Christmas story proper, one is during (which we have already read) and one is right afterwards. We will look at what these three mentions of peace can teach us.

The first mention of peace is in a prophecy given by Zachariah about his son John, who would prepare the way for the Lord:

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest;
For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways,
To give knowledge of salvation to His people
By the remission of their sins,
Through the tender mercy of our God,
With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us;

To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death,
To guide our feet into the path of peace. (Luke 2:76-79)

In preparing the way for the Lord John preached repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He preached the need to notice one's evils, to resist them, to fight against them, to change one's life for the sake of the Lord. This preparation is what allows the Lord to come as the sun shining into darkness, to guide our feet into the path of peace.

Sometimes we wish for peace before we have actually prepared for it. We want to go right to the end. Unfortunately, before we can have peace we must go through conflict. Without the conflict there will be no peace. The Lord Himself said,

Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division (Luke 12:51)

The kind of conflict is an internal one; it is the conflict between our higher ideals and our natural wants, between our conscience on the one hand and the pull of desire on the other. At first in these conflicts it seems that following the Lord will rob us of our peace: it feels peaceful when we go through life without much thought for how we impact other people; but when we strive to live according to higher ideals it becomes stressful.

We see this even in small ways. I think most of us have probably caught ourselves behaving badly, and stopped midway through, and sighed to ourselves that it would be so much easier not to have a conscience. But there are bigger versions as well of course. The addict fighting his addiction is facing an uphill battle, with the constant pull of backsliding. The promise of marriage involves putting aside tons of one's own wants and needs for the sake of a family. Remaining ethical in business means an ongoing resistance against cultural pushes the other way. When we begin, the Lord's path does not appear to be one of peace.

But that is not the end result. Through temptations we are brought into a state of true peace.

But when the person comes out of temptation light appears together with the spiritual heat that goes with it, that is, truth together with the good that goes with it. This brings the person cheerfulness after his distress; and that cheerfulness is the morning that follows night in the next life. The reason why good is perceived then and truth appears is that after temptation truth and good penetrate more deeply within and become firmly rooted. (*Secrets of Heaven* §6829)

Following the conflict there is joy and happiness greater than the shallow or superficial peace we had before. The peace before temptation is the peace of ignorance. The peace afterwards is the peace of contentment and satisfaction of living a life of which you can be proud, a life that is truly good. The Lord, in teaching us right from wrong, good from evil, does indeed set us on a path that leads through conflict; but in the end it is the path of peace. It is perhaps noteworthy that this is the path, not the destination. Peace is the result of an ongoing process, not a destination at which we arrive.

The nature of that peace can be glimpsed in the second instance of the word, in the message of the angels to the shepherds.

Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, 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, goodwill toward men!" (Luke 2:10-14)

As before said this is as it were a promise that is hard to see as having been fulfilled. Yet in some sense it was: the Lord really was born, a saviour available to all people, the source of goodness and peace. That peace is always available to us as individuals even if it is rejected in the world. Peace, true peace, is from the Lord alone, not from the absence of conflict in the world at large. The nature of this peace

that comes from the Lord is described in the Teachings of the New Church as follows:

By "peace" are signified all things in their aggregate which are from the Lord, and thence all things of heaven and the church, and the happiness of life in them; these are of peace in the highest or inmost sense. It follows therefore that "peace" is charity, spiritual security, and internal rest; for when man is in the Lord, he is in peace with his neighbour, which is charity; in protection against the hells, which is spiritual security; and when he is in peace with his neighbour, and in protection against the hells, he is in internal rest from evils and falsities. (*Apocalypse Revealed* §306)

When we are in the Lord, and the Lord in us, we can find a deeper peace. We can, regardless of circumstance, practice charity towards the neighbour; we can, regardless of circumstances, be protected from the hells that assault us from within (the preparation we talked about earlier); and when we have these things, we are, spiritually at peace.

But as we know, peace never seems to last. We go through the hard stuff, we arrive at what we want to be our final destination, and then we fall away. We either forget to keep doing the work, or encounter some unforeseen hardship that throws us off. Even the internal peace seems fleeting. This brings me to the third instance of peace in the Christmas story. It comes when Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the temple to make the appropriate sacrifices, where they are met by a man named Simeon:

And when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the law, he took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said:
"Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace,
According to Your word;
For my eyes have seen Your salvation
Which You have prepared before the face of all peoples,
A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles,
And the glory of Your people Israel." (Luke 2:27-32)

Simeon was able to depart in peace because he had seen the salvation prepared for his people. That salvation had not yet occurred. Simeon would most likely not have

seen the ministry, death, and subsequent resurrection of the Lord. Yet He could depart in peace, because he trusted that it would come, in spite of the many challenges that would come before then. He even immediately after gave the bleak prophecy to Mary that,

Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed. (Luke 2:34-35)

Yet even in turmoil, there could be a kind of peace in the hope of a better future.

That peace is with us as well, even when we least feel it, when we feel at our most conflicted and tempted by hell.

Without this hidden peace motivating us, we could never come into real peace, we could never survive all those many things that are so overwhelming in life.

Something very similar to this occurs with the new life with one who is being regenerated. At first he experiences a state of serenity, but as he moves on into the new life so he moves into a state that is not serene. For evils and falsities which he has taken into himself previously now emerge and show themselves, and these trouble him, so much so at length that he undergoes temptations and trials from the devil's crew who try all the time to destroy his state of new life. But despite this a state of peace exists with him inmosty. But for its presence inmosty he would not put up any fight at all, for in all the conflicts he experiences he sees that state as the end in view. If that end were not in view he would never have the power and strength to fight. And this is also what enables him to overcome. And since it is the end in view he also enters that state once conflict or temptations are past. (*Secrets of Heaven* §3696)

It may be cold comfort to know it intellectually; but the Lord's peace is within you, even when your mind is wracked with doubt and concern.

These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have conquered the world." (John 17:33)