



“Peace on Earth”

Luke 2:1-20

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

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If you had a vital message to deliver to as large an audience as possible, how would you get the word out? You could certainly get enormous exposure if you took out a full page ad in the *New York Times*. With home delivery and online access, it has a huge readership.

Many would turn to Facebook or Twitter to get their message to the masses. These new forms of social media have been credited with generating a lot of buzz in the blink of an eye. Young Egyptians used these tools to launch the large scale protests that brought down the Mubarak regime.

If you had really deep pockets, you might decide to buy an ad during the Super Bowl. A 30 second ad will cost you \$3 million, but more than 100 million people will hear your spiel.

In the ancient world, the best method of broadcasting your message to as many as possible was for the Emperor to issue a decree. When the most powerful man of the most powerful country issued an official proclamation, word spread throughout the enormous empire.

That’s how Luke begins his story that we hold so dear. “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.” And you could not be counted for the Roman census just anywhere. You were required to go to your home town. Thus, Mary and Joseph, who were living in Nazareth, were required to travel to Bethlehem. Being great with child was no excuse for dodging such a trip.

They made it to Bethlehem in the nick of time, but accommodations were scarce for a poor, young couple like Mary and Joseph, so they camped out with the animals. When Mary gave birth to her son, there was no cradle on hand, so when she wasn’t rocking him on her lap and Joseph wasn’t walking around with him in his arms, they laid him in a manger, the feeding trough for animals.

Luke tells a story of dramatic contrasts. He begins by naming the most well-known and most powerful figure of his day – Emperor Augustus. The mere mention of the Emperor’s name evoked images of power, wealth, extravagance and notoriety.

Against this backdrop, Luke tells the story of the birth of Jesus, who is Emmanuel, God with us. This one, the Savior of the world and God’s own son, is born not in royal courts, not in the finest medical

facilities, not in the capital of the empire, not with throngs of people gathered around awaiting the news, but in the humblest of settings, in an unremarkable town, to a poor and obscure couple. Rather than an empirical decree to announce *this* birth, Luke says that God sent messengers out when most people were tucked in for the night, to announce to a small group of poor, marginalized people – shepherds – about the birth that would change the course of history.

The angels informed the shepherds where they could find the new born king, but before the angels departed, they had one more message: “Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth.”

Peace on earth. Isn't that one of the greatest yearnings of the human heart? Many would give anything simply to have peace within their families. They plead for the battles between siblings to stop. They pray for an end to the rancor between parent and child.

What would we give for the conflicts within our community to cease? No more children or spouses abused. No more senseless fights between people who disagree.

What if there were no more ethnic cleansing? No more apartheid? No more wars? What if nations were committed to settling disputes without armed conflict?

Peace on earth. It was the message that accompanied the birth of Jesus and it became one of his central teachings. After healing people who had lived with the torment of physical ailments, he said, “Your faith has made you well; go in peace.” (Mark 5:34, Luke 8:48) After forgiving sins, he said, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” (Luke 7:50) When he sent his disciples out to spread his message, he told them to pronounce a blessing on any house that welcomed them. The first thing they were to say is “Peace to this house!” (Luke 10:5) When teaching the throngs during the Sermon on the Mount, he said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (Matthew 5:43-44) Jesus said to all who dared to follow him, and today, says to all who risk the adventure of a Christ-committed life, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” (Matthew 5:9) When Jesus made his final trip to Jerusalem, he paused outside of the gates of the city, and he wept. Through his tears, he said, “If only you had recognized the things that make for peace.” (Luke 19:42)

Theologian, author and provocative thinker, Will Campbell, writes that it is absurd “that most serious wars today are by people of competing religions.” Since people of faith are called to be peacemakers, here is what he proposes. He says, “Let's do this: Judaism is the oldest of the three major faiths, Christianity is the adolescent in the middle, and Islam is the youngest. The youngest is generally the favored in the family. So let's all go to their house, all kneel on a rug and put our heads to the ground and pray, vowing never to kill one another again in the name of God.”¹

One of the greatest mistakes people make today is to imagine that they can do little to create peace between people of different religions, races, cultures and nations. But peace is far too important to our planet for us to leave it in the hands of government leaders. Peace does not happen when treaties are signed. Peace happens when individuals are committed to living together in peace with people with whom they differ.

In his recent book, *A New Harmony*, Celtic scholar Philip Newell ponders his elderly father's values, characteristics and beliefs, and how these have shaped his own life. One thing in particular about his father he wants to carry on is his father's hope for peace.

His father was born off the Shankhill Road in Belfast, Northern Ireland, the most militant of the Protestant communities. He was born in 1922, the same month that the Irish Civil War began. Newell says that his father “breathed in the infection of soul that tore apart the life of a whole nation. He knew within himself the hatred that divided Protestants from Catholics.”

However, a few years ago, when his father was in his mid-eighties he asked Philip to take him to the south of Ireland. His father had never ventured into this Catholic part of the country. Philip “arranged a family vacation in County Kerry and on the first Sunday took his father into Dingle Town, naively thinking there might be a variety of churches from which to choose. There was only one church: St Mary’s. Philip felt awkward standing outside a Roman Catholic Church with his Protestant father and said, ‘We don’t have to go in there.’ His father responded, ‘I want to go to church and I want to go in there. Still unsure, Philip said, ‘Well, we don’t have to stay for the whole service. His father replied, ‘I want to go to church and I want to stay for the whole service.’”

“The priest was a delightful man whose warm and folksy style was endearing. When it came to the prayer of intercession, he said, ‘Now we pray for the weather, Lord. It’s not been too bad but it could be much better. And we have people visiting from all over the world, Lord, and we’d like them to see our beautiful country, so we pray for the weather, Lord.’ And on and on he went.”

“When it came to the Lord’s Supper, Newell glanced at his father. This might be the time to leave. But his Belfast-born Protestant father had tears streaming down his face. His father stood up and walked forward and received the bread and wine from a Roman Catholic priest from the south of Ireland.”²

Philip never could have imagined such a thing happening. And he thought, if this can happen, there is hope for the world. Where is the contention in your life that you cannot imagine being healed? Where are the hostilities between people that we assume will continue forever?

God does not control and predetermine the events of the world. The future is open to new possibilities if only we will seize them and respond in Christ-like ways. When Jesus was born, the angels proclaimed, “Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth.” What would happen if you heard the message of the angels as if it were addressed directly to you?

Dorothy Day said, “I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least.”

God beckons us; God challenges us; God pleads with us to live together in peace.

NOTES

1. Will D. Campbell, *Soul Among Lions: Musings of a Bootleg Preacher*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), p.49.
2. Philip Newell, *A New Harmony: The Spirit, the Earth, and the Human Soul*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), p. 138-139.