

AN ALTOGETHER DIFFERENT PEACE
LUKE 2:10-14; MICAH 5:2-5

I want to begin by asking you to use your imaginations about a portion of the Christmas story recorded in Luke 2. Imagine yourself as one of the shepherds keeping watch over your flock. You are in a secluded field in the rugged, hilly terrain of Judea near the village of Bethlehem. It is night, the stars are shining brightly, and there is a chill in the air. You are with four other shepherds, your long-time companions who happen to be cousins, with whom you not only share a vocation, but your thoughts, opinions, and dreams. Earlier you engaged in a lively conversation about God and politics. The census mandated by the Emperor had everyone talking politics these days. As usual, nothing had been resolved.

But it was now the middle of the night and the conversation had long since died out. The fire was about to do the same. You and two of your companions are stretched out on the ground, near the glowing embers. The other two shepherds are a few yards away, a little closer to the flock, supposedly keeping a keen eye and ear open for any signs of danger. At the moment, it seems they are dozing, too.

It is just another routine night of work—nothing unusual or out of the ordinary. Suddenly...you are confronted by a brilliant, blinding light. Then you see him...her...it...you are not sure what it is. It is a glorious, unearthly, supernatural being (an angel?), and it is glowing. And you gasp...and hold your breath...and squint...and involuntarily raise your arm to defend yourself from its radiance, for it is terrifying!

Then you hear the angel speak clear as day, in your language. *“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger”* (Luke 2:10-12).

Then, if it were possible, the sky is slowly, steadily filled with even more brightness, and with it the sound of a mighty rushing wind rising to a deafening crescendo as a great throng of angels appear overhead exclaiming, ¹⁴ *“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!”*

I don't know about you, but some of my favorite characters of the Christmas story are these extra-terrestrial beings that suddenly appear on the scene unannounced, out of nowhere, proclaim this message of good news to the local riff raff, and then quickly vanish into thin air. Just who are these creatures, why did they show up to these shepherds, and what is the significance of their announcement?

Chances are your view of the angels in this story has been heavily influenced by the imaginations of painters, artists, and film producers. From their renderings and conceptions, angels seem like nice, pleasant creatures. We would probably like to meet one if we had the chance. But since we probably never will, we don't take them too seriously.

That is unfortunate, because there is a lot we can learn from angels. Oh, the Bible doesn't reveal too much about some of the things we'd like to know about angels—how they look, what they wear, how they get from here to there, etc. What it does say is that *“angels are ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation”* (Heb. 1:14).

The Scriptures also reveal that angels are intensely interested in our salvation. In fact, before Jesus came to earth, they were students of prophecy. Peter says that one of their favorite pastimes was analyzing the messages of the prophets, trying to figure out the times and circumstances in which God's salvation would take effect (1 Pet. 1:12).

Now, here is how I believe that relates to the Christmas story. I wonder if the angels of heaven were not at all certain how and when God's plan of salvation would unfold. I wonder even if God's plan to become a *man* might have taken them by surprise. Who could have guessed that the One whose throne they surrounded day and night, the One who was the object of their undivided attention, the One whose glory and majesty never ceased to amaze them would change his form and become one of those inferior creatures called human beings? Perhaps not even angels, who know God much better than we do, could have imagined such a thing!

It is from this perspective that I would like to interpret verse 13. I used to think this heavenly host was a massive choir. I imagined several neat, orderly rows of angels suspended in space, each dressed in white robes with golden collars, each holding copies of Handel's *Messiah*. I used to think the heavenly anthem was solely for the benefit of the shepherds, that the angels were simply performing the cantata they had been rehearsing for centuries.

I am more inclined to believe this angelic outburst was sudden, maybe even spontaneous, and that it may have been primarily for the benefit of the angels themselves. They were so excited about what was happening on earth that they just had to tell someone because they could not contain themselves!

This is pure speculation, but I wonder if the angels said to Lord, "Please! There lies the King of kings and no one on earth knows it. There is the One we have worshiped day and night, lying in a feeding trough for barn animals, with no one to proclaim His worth, no one to acknowledge His greatness. Lord, please let us tell someone!"

Like I said, I cannot imagine that the angels' appearance was a staged performance, but rather a spontaneous outburst of praise by the creatures who knew more about what was going on that holy night than anyone else. They knew that this was the most significant day and the most significant event in the history of the world up until that time. They knew that God was setting into motion His plan to save the fallen human race. This baby was God's gift. Through Him mankind could be forgiven and reconciled to God and live with Him forever and ever, just as they were allowed to do.

And the thought that mankind would finally get to see God as they had, and relate to God as they had, and give glory to God as they had filled the angels with a joy that overflowed in praise.

Incidentally, the Bible says that angels still rejoice. Later in Luke's gospel Jesus tells us that whenever someone receives God's gift of salvation the angels celebrate, because they know just how incredible and consequential God's gift is.

But there is something else about the angels' proclamations that I would like to point out. When the angel announced that ¹¹ *For unto you is born this day in the city of David (Bethlehem) a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.* and then the other angels sang, ¹⁴ *"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!"* they were proclaiming the very heart of God's grand, eternal plan to save mankind, a plan that was foretold by the prophet Micah centuries before.

The Lord had declared through Micah,

² *But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.*

³ *Therefore He shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth;*

*then the rest of His brothers shall return
to the people of Israel.*

⁴ And He shall stand and shepherd His flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD His God.

And they shall dwell secure, for now He shall be great to the ends of the earth.

⁵ And He shall be their peace (Micah 5:2-5)

Let me give you a little background so that we can better understand the significance and meaning of this prophecy. By the time Jesus was born, Augustus Caesar had already been emperor for twenty-five years. His kingdom represented mankind's best attempt at securing comprehensive world peace. He ruled from Gibraltar to Jerusalem, from Great Britain to the Black Sea doing what no one had done for two hundred years before him: he had brought peace to the wider, Roman world. It was known as *Pax Romana*.

But it was peace at a price. A price paid in heavy taxes and tolls, forced slavery, and compulsory allegiance by subjects in far off lands. Augustus provided peace as long as it was consistent with the interests of his Empire and the myth of his own glory and divinity. In other words, there was peace on whom *his* favor rested. But get out of favor with him, get on his bad side, defy his decrees and there would be swift and bloody reprisals.

And here is the paradox in the angels' pronouncement: *God's* plan for peace on earth was set into motion at the very time Caesar was bent on maintaining his slippery hold on peace in his empire. Augustus' means of preserving peace was by gripping his subjects more tightly. Squeeze them and squish them so that it hurts to wiggle and try to get free.

And so, this "king of peace" waves his hand in Rome, sends out a decree that all the world should be taxed, each subject forced to travel to his hometown. And fifteen hundred miles away, in an obscure province, a young couple undertakes a hazardous journey, resulting in the birth of a child in the very town mentioned in Micah's ancient prophecy. This, of course, is the child the angels proclaimed would grow up to be the *real* "King of peace."

Look again at Micah's prophecy, **verse 4**.

⁴ And He shall stand and shepherd His flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD His God. *God's* Ruler, the Messiah, would not be a king who lorded it over His subjects, demanding things from them to further His own interests and promote His own glory and meet His own needs. Rather, *He* would be the One giving out. He would *attend* His subjects as a shepherd cares for His sheep. He would feed them, care for them, provide for them, protect them, and secure them, and He would do all of these things effectively, since He would do it in the strength of Yahweh.

Micah goes on. *And they shall dwell secure, for now He shall be great to the ends of the earth.*

Dwell secure. What does that mean? Is He ensuring the perpetual safety of all His followers? Does it mean that the subjects of His kingdom won't die or fall on hard times or be harmed in any way? Does it signal the end of war, hostility, and injustice?

No, it does not mean any of these things—not while we live in this earth realm, anyway. When the Messiah came to earth He told His followers, *"In this world you will have tribulation"*. But in the next breath He said, *"...Take heart, I have overcome the world"* (John 16:33).

Jesus also said, *"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me...My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand"* (Jn. 10:14; 27-29).

The security that was predicted in Micah and announced by the angels has nothing whatsoever to do with our health or wealth or longevity in this world. It has no relation to our bank statements, retirement accounts, marital status, job security, or anything else in this world. The kind of security Micah was referring to is a different kind of security altogether, a security that is out of this world, and a security that will not be fully realized until we leave this world.

It is a security that is rooted in a relationship with God that comes through faith in His Son, Jesus the Messiah. It is a security that comes from being forgiven of our sins, reconciled to God, made righteous in His sight, and adopted as His sons and daughters. It is a security that comes from being the objects of His unconditional, unfailing love, and knowing that absolutely nothing can ever separate us from that love (Rom. 8:39-43).

And it is a security that comes from the assurance that when we die we will be ushered into the presence of Jesus where we shall live forever and ever with recreated bodies that are sinless, glorious, and capable of living, worshiping, and loving in a manner that is worthy of the One in whose presence we shall live.

Finally, Micah prophesies, *“And He shall be their peace.”* What does that mean? What would it look like?

In Micah’s day Assyria ruled the world, and undoubtedly Micah’s readers thought it would be freedom from that tyrannical and oppressive state. Jews in Jesus’ day transferred the meaning to Rome. And they could only imagine this Man of peace—the anticipated Messiah—rivaling the current “man of peace” who sat on a throne in Rome. He would be a Jewish version of Caesar, they thought, only more powerful, more just, more glorious, and, of course, more favorable toward them. They would prosper, they would live securely, and they would be given special treatment.

But that is not what God’s word through Micah means, nor is it what the angels’ pronouncement means. God’s Messiah, born in Bethlehem represented a completely different kind of empire, a *different* glory, and a *different* peace.

Someone described it this way: “Augustus’s empire is like a well-lit room at night: the lamps are arranged beautifully, they shed pretty patterns, but they have not conquered the darkness outside. Jesus’ kingdom is like the morning star rising, signaling that it is time to blow out the candles, to throw open the curtains, and to welcome the new day that is dawning” (N.T. Wright).

We see these two kingdoms squared off against each other toward the end of John’s Gospel, when Pilate confronts Jesus with a question: “Don’t you know that I have the power to either free you or have you crucified?” (John 19:10). That is the language of the world’s version of kingdom, power, and glory. “Support me and my kingdom or I’ll kill you”.

Jesus responds by quietly reminding Pilate that all power comes from on high (19:11), and by getting on with the job of living out the love of God for the salvation of the world. Luke’s message of the baby in the manger stands over and against the best empire that man is capable of building, inviting us to contemplate the radical redefinition of truth, peace, kingdom, power, and glory.

And so once again, then, there went out a decree from Caesar, which had a profound effect fifteen hundred miles away. Rebel kings get crucified. If you let this man go, said the chief priests to Pilate, you are no friend of Caesar’s.

And this is how Micah’s ancient prophecy would be fulfilled—how the Messiah would *“be their peace.”* Ironically, God’s version of peace on earth was achieved through Rome’s violent attempt to maintain its own version of peace on earth. When Jesus was murdered for

being a perceived insurrectionist, He was actually fulfilling His mission on this earth. He, by His *death*, became our peace.

But that is because Jesus, the Messiah, Son of the living God, was born to die. He became a man in order to bear the sins of the world in His body. And all the while He lived in His body, though tempted in every way we are, He never once sinned, qualifying Him to be our Substitute, so that when He hung spread eagle on the cross, in the words of the Apostle Paul, *“He who knew no sin became sin for us...” (2 Cor.5:21)*. And while on that cross His Father intentionally and deliberately kindled His anger and funneled it onto Jesus’ body, so that Jesus became the object of God’s wrath.

That body bore our sin and experienced our punishment so that God’s justice could be satisfied and we wouldn’t have to be punished; so that we could become God’s friends; so that we could be forgiven; so that we could have eternal life.

That is why Jesus died. He died to save you and me from the consequences of our sin—eternal separation from God in hell, a place of conscious, unending torment. He died because we were helpless to save ourselves.

A few years ago, while on vacation, I sat down on a park bench in a city near Seattle. There was a newspaper folded neatly on the bench beside me, and out of sheer boredom I picked it up and began to peruse the headlines. On the bottom of the front page of this Seattle Newspaper my eyes fell upon these words: *“Jesus was a Crybaby story on page 13”*.

I turned to page 13 where there was an article entitled, *“Jesus is Out, So and So is In”*. “So and so” is a popular self-help guru in our culture whom the author designated *the American messiah*. In the article she made the following statement: “No messiah today would let Himself be strung up on a cross to save the world. He would say, ‘You’re the life raft. Why don’t you save yourself?’” (Trisha Ready, *The Stranger*, April 6, 2000).

I want to submit to you that Jesus *let* Himself be strung up on a cross precisely because we *couldn’t* save ourselves. The cross, ugly and horrible as it was, was God’s predetermined method of rescuing us from our lost and sinful condition. It was the means by which our sins could be paid for and God’s justice could be satisfied and peace with God could be secured. A peace that blossoms in this life when we are reconciled to God through faith in Jesus, but that comes to full fruition when we leave this life and get to live in the presence of Jesus forever.

¹⁴ *“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!” (Luke 2:14).*