

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: *Good News of Great Joy*
Service Theme: *Peace on Earth*
Sermon Theme: *Peace In, Peace Out*
December 31, 2023—Colossians 3:12-17

It's been one week since we heard the angel chorus praise God before the shepherds, "***Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.***" One week since we joyously sang, "***Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King; peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.***" One week ago on Christmas, we marveled at the promise that because Jesus was born, there is peace on earth!

So, have you felt that peace this week? I don't know about you, but I still heard news reports about murders, drive-by shootings, and wars being fought around the globe. I bet your deployed loved ones didn't get to come home because there are no longer any threats to be defended against. I'm guessing with all the family gatherings and kids home on Christmas break, you've even felt a lack of peace in your own household. So where exactly is this "peace on earth" the angels were singing about?

In one sense, the angels weren't telling us to expect literal "peace on earth" because of Jesus' birth. But in another sense, we do have "peace on earth" because of Jesus' birth. While that sounds contradictory, allow God's Word to explain!

Let's start with today's Gospel, where, we meet an old man named Simeon. We're told, "***It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.***" Trusting in God's promise, Simeon had waited and watched for his faith to become sight. Until one day, the Holy Spirit moved Simeon to go to the Temple courts in Jerusalem. There, he saw a rather ordinary sight—two parents with a baby boy, there to make the necessary purification and consecration sacrifices, like every other Jewish family.

In fact, they probably weren't even the only young family there doing that that day.

But through eyes of faith, Simeon saw something extraordinary in that ordinary family. Taking the month-old Jesus in his arms, Simeon proclaimed, "***Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations.***"

There's that word again! Simeon said he could depart in peace! And notice why: "***My eyes have seen your salvation.***" By faith, Simeon saw in that baby more than just an earthly ruler who would end wars and conflicts, or salve the troubles and struggles of life that rob people of peace. In fact, as Simeon told Mary, Jesus would be the cause of a lot of earthly conflict and grief—including for Mary. "***This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against...and a sword will pierce your own soul too.***"

Jesus didn't come to bring literal peace to the earth. In fact, because the world is broken by sin, and occupied entirely by people who have a sinful nature which drives inherently selfish attitudes and actions, there will never truly be literal "peace on earth." That's why violence, murder, war, combat, and conflict remain part of our reality. And because we're also sinners with a sinful nature, our own attitudes and actions often cause a lack of peace in our lives.

Simeon could depart in peace because in that baby boy, he saw God's salvation! The Savior of the world! The one whom God had promised to send who, through his holy life, suffering, death, and resurrection would restore peace between the holy God and sinful mankind. Through Jesus, there is peace on earth like the angels sang—that is, peace between us and God!

Like Simeon, that peace with God through Jesus' saving work allows us to depart in peace when we die. But that peace with God also allows us to live in peace! That's where our second reading, from Paul's letter to the Colossian Christians comes into the picture.

Paul writes, *“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.”* Do you notice what Paul does first? Before encouraging these Christians to clothe themselves with the kind of attitudes and actions that promote peace, he first reminds them of the peace they have with God through Jesus. You are God’s chosen people! Holy! Dearly loved! Before telling them what they ought to do, Paul first reminds them why they should do it! The peace we have with God through Jesus motivates us to have peace with others in our lives! In other words, **Peace in, Peace Out.** The more we take in reminders and encouragement from the peace we have with God, the more peace will flow out in our lives.

Paul says that those peace-promoting attitudes and actions will be so evident in our lives, they’ll be like our clothing. *“Compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.”* Aren’t these the attitudes necessary to live a life at peace with others?

And aren’t these the actions necessary to live a life at peace with others? *“Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone.”* But notice again how Paul reminds them of their why: *“Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”*

So, how’s that been going for you? Are those the kind of attitudes and actions people would use to describe you and the way you live your life? Is that how you would describe the way you live your life? If I’m being completely honest, I don’t think I could say that about myself. And I’m guessing you probably feel the same. Again, that self-focused, selfish sinful nature pulls so powerfully on our hearts and minds and hearts that it’s incredibly difficult to live at peace with others!

Even more so when we fail to take Paul’s encouragement to heart: *“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.”* Let the peace of Christ—that is, the peace we have with God through Christ-- rule in your hearts!

We might picture “peace” sitting on the throne of our hearts, ruling over all things like a king telling us, “Just be at peace!” But that can be hard to fathom, when so often things in the world or in our lives make being at peace seem impossible.

But the Greek word translated “rule” has a different picture than a tyrant king barking unrealistic orders from the throne. The word *“brabeueto”* means to “order” or “control,” but in the sense of the work an umpire does at a sporting event. They don’t control the game by making judgments based on their own preferences and opinions. Rather, they control and order the game through correct judgments based on a standard of rules already in place.

The peace that we have with God rules our hearts in the same way. Everything in our life gets filtered through the standard of the peace we have with God, to judge and determine whether it’s something that can rob our lives of peace or prevent us from being at peace with others. When the peace we have with God guides and directs our attitudes and actions, we can be at peace with others too! Again—peace in, peace out.

As I suggested before, isn’t it the selfishness of our sinful nature that roadblocks living at peace? The selfish drive for power, wealth, fame, or revenge so often drives war. The selfish desire to always be right or get our way that so often drives conflict within personal relationships. The selfish desire to hang on to the harm another has caused me so I can benefit from it that prevents me from forgiving.

But if you cling to the peace you have with God, those circumstances fall under the judgment of that standard! And our selfishness is subdued. Let me give you some examples.

“I’m at peace with God!” That means my sins that fill me with guilt and shame can’t rob me of peace, because they’ve been forgiven. “I’m at peace with God!” That means I can freely forgive those who’ve sinned against me—because that’s how Jesus has forgiven me! “I’m at peace with God!” That means it doesn’t have to rob me of peace when I don’t have everyone’s love or approval. Because I’ve already

got the love and approval of the only one that matters! “I’m at peace with God!” That means I don’t always have to be right, or get what I want, or impose my will on everyone else to the detriment of living at peace with them, because being right doesn’t matter when I’m right with him! “I have peace with God!” That means I don’t need to be robbed of peace by anxiety or fear while trying to carve out identity, meaning, and purpose from the things I do in my life—because I already have the best identity, meaning, and purpose in him! “I have peace with God!” That means even when I go through struggles, trials, suffering, and loss, it can’t rob me of my peace, because the God who willingly gave up everything so that I could be at peace with him certainly also knows how to use these things for my good and my eternal peace. “I have peace with God!” That means, like Simeon, even in death I can have peace, because I know I’ll “peace out” according to God’s promises.

If we take to heart the peace we have with God in Christ, then we’ll be better equipped and empowered to live in peace with ourselves and with others! Peace in, peace out!

That’s why Paul encourages us to keep on putting “peace in!” To keep renewing our hearts with reminders about the peace we have with God! As Paul writes, ***“Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.”***

Paul mentions three ways we can put peace in. The first is to let the message of Christ, the good news found in the Bible dwell richly among us. We want to spend so much time reading, hearing, and learning God’s Word that it’s like it’s taken up residence among us. We do that whenever we read, hear, and study God’s Word in personal or family devotions, Bible Study and Sunday School, and in worship.

Second, we’re reminded of the peace we have with God when we gather as one in worship, and teach and admonish each other with the Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs taken from God’s Word, which reaffirm the good news of peace with God through Jesus!

Third, notice that Paul says we are to ***“teach and admonish one another!”*** We put peace in when we surround ourselves with Christian Community. It’s not God’s intention for us to be spiritual islands, isolated and secluded. It’s God’s intention for us to be surrounded by encouragement and love of other Christians who share our faith, and to give us beautiful opportunities to live at peace with others who share peace with God!

Unfortunately, sometimes that Christian community can be a place where we struggle to live in peace with others. As sinners, Christian family hurts or offends each other. We have different opinions on things, and selfish insistence on always being right or getting our way causes rifts that can rip a congregation apart, and even make it a place devoid of peace.

But that’s exactly why it’s so important that we keep coming back to this church community, instead of leaving it behind. Because it’s here that all those opportunities to let the message of Christ dwell richly among us are provided. As we gather together to be filled with peace through the reminder of the peace we have with God through Jesus, peace will flow out of us! We’ll be better clothed with kindness, compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and love. We’ll be better equipped to bear with one another and forgive each other!

And although we won’t find perfect peace in this life, or live in perfect peace towards each other in this life, because we know the peace we have with God, we can better be at peace in this life. Especially as we look forward to the day we will “depart in peace,” and to the day when Jesus will come again, and bring this world to its final, perfect, eternal peace! So every day, we continue singing the Christmas angels’ song—to rejoice in and take to heart this all important truth: ***“Peace on earth and mercy mild; God and sinners... reconciled.”***