

**+ Luke 2:14 + Theme: Peace in Jesus +
+ Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord: Christmas Eve + 24 December 2016 +**

“What does peace look like?” Last week I had the opportunity to pose that question to a class of 8th graders at one of our Lutheran elementary schools in inner-city Milwaukee. So what kind of answers do you think they gave? To be honest, their answers weren’t much different than the answers I’d probably get from you if I asked you the same question.

What does peace look like? People getting along with each other. People supporting and helping each other rather than ridiculing or hurting each other. No more fighting. No more violence. No more wars. It’s really no different than what you hear so much of this time of year—calls for peace and unity, hope for peace on earth at Christmas time, pleas for everyone to just get along with each other through the holidays—a little quiet before we go back to fighting with each other. You hear it in countless Christmas songs imagining world peace. You may even come across examples from history like the Christmas truces that took place during the American Civil War or the famous Christmas truce of 1914 where British and German soldiers joined together in singing Christmas carols and playing soccer before going back to the trenches for another four years of war.

People want physical peace, peace they can see, this time of year. Why? Why picture “peace” as something we want physical and tangible and visible? While there is something to be said about having calm in our lives, perhaps that desire to have “peace” you can see and feel and experience comes from the fact that we’re all missing something in our lives—no matter how secure our lives might seem. Take a look at what’s going on in the world around us, in our nation, in our communities, and even in our homes—and what do you find? Better said, what don’t you find? You don’t find real, lasting peace. You hope for peace in your world, but then the report of another terrorist attack foiled or successful comes across your newsfeed. You hope for peace in your nation, but all you seem to find is more shouting and vilifying. You hope for peace in your community, but people just seem to be getting more impatient, more quick to react with anger, and less willing to get along. You hope for peace in your home, but sinners living under one roof can be a powder keg.

So Christmas time rolls around and you hope for peace in the catchy songs and the twinkly lights and even hearing the reading of the Christmas Gospel. After all, didn’t the angels sing, **“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”** We all long for peace. We all hope for peace. We all want to see peace, but as nice as that visible peace can be, it doesn’t last, does it? Sometimes it can last for weeks or months or years. Other times it barely lasts through the holidays. Remember those Christmas truces that I mentioned earlier? All of those soldiers went back to war with each other. Songs often ring hollow when you listen to them more closely and realize how shallow they really are. Christmas decorations eventually get packed away again until next year—and old issues come back.

Why is that such peace doesn’t last? The answer to that question has everything to do with the sad reality of something every one of us shares. It’s the reality of sin in our world. It’s not just the bad stuff you do. It’s the good you fail to do. It’s the greedy or lustful or hateful thought you allow to linger in your mind. Visible peace falls apart in the face of pride or arrogance or hatred or selfishness or greed. Nations go back to war with others or themselves. Communities grow farther apart and loved ones cut each other down needlessly. Sin ruins any peace in this world, because it has ruined the peace we once had with God. Our first parents tried to take God’s glory for themselves, and in so doing they shredded their peaceful relationship they had with God. Then they passed that peace-shaped hole on to their kids and to their kids and to their kids all the way down to you and me. When you step back and think about it, we really don’t know what peace looks like. We just know that it’s missing in our lives, no matter how we try to fill that hole.

...But there is a solution to that, you know. Go back to that Christmas Gospel from Luke 2 that you’ve been hearing from the children tonight. The account is not just something poetically recited by Linus in the Charlie Brown Christmas Special, but even more than that. Let’s go back and ask the question, “What are those angels really singing about?” Why would the angel hosts leave their heavenly home to fill the night sky of Bethlehem with the most glorious concert in the history of our world? They didn’t come to announce world peace with an end of wars and conflict and fighting or to let you and me know that this is a time of year when we should all get along. No, they came to sing of real peace.

As with any portion of Scripture, it is absolutely important to read each verse within its context and within the context of the rest of God’s Word. So what do you find when you look at the immediate context of that glorious song of the angels on that first Christmas night? You find a single angel appearing to a small group of terrified shepherds in the fields outside of Bethlehem. He didn’t sneak up on them. No, Luke tells us, **“the glory of the**

Lord shone around them...” and those shepherds were naturally terrified, but that angel hadn’t come to terrify a bunch of Jewish shepherds watching their flocks.

No, that angel had come to announce the arrival of real peace in our world, the arrival of the peace that we’ve all been longing for, the arrival of peace between sinful humanity and the holy God. **“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”** (Luke 2:10-11) After telling those shepherds how they would find this newborn Savior, **“suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.’”** (2:13-14) The message of that angel changes everything, doesn’t it? I bet even the youngest child knows what peace looks like now.

So what does true peace look like? You find true peace in a baby boy born to poor parents in nothing more than a cave where animals were kept and whose first crib had previously served as a feeding trough for farm animals. Now you might be tempted to look at that child born in a barn and think, “You can’t be serious. Peace from him? He’d be lucky to survive to adulthood.”

Yet look closer and see the shadow of a cross lengthen behind the manger bed of that little Child. Look closer and find true peace in the Child wrapped in cloths who will grow up to overturn all the nasty effects and consequences of sin, whose sacrifice one day will be the forever-and-eternal peace treaty between sinners like you and me and God, whose empty tomb will bring eternal peace to souls struggling with guilt and death until the end of time.

Look closer and find true peace in the Child who came to be your Savior—to save you from sin, to save me from sin, to save you and me from ourselves, and all the ways that we have shredded any hope of peace between each other and between us and God. Look closer and find true peace in Jesus, in Christ our Lord whose coming was promised thousands of years ago and fulfilled in every detail. Look closer and realize what real peace looks like. Look closer and see the One like no one else in history, the true Prince of Peace.

Of course, that’s going to change your life. Now that doesn’t mean all your problems will go away and life will suddenly get easier for you and those around you. That doesn’t mean that your world or nation or community or family will suddenly become more peaceful, but when you have real peace in Jesus, that impacts how you interact with others as you reflect his peace in your life. That even moves you to want to share that peace in Jesus with others. Having real peace in Jesus lifts your eyes heavenward from this life, this world that so lacks peace in any form—and you look forward to seeing him with your own eyes because you, even now, enjoy his peace. May our Lord fill not only your Christmas, but your entire life with his peace both now and forevermore. **“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests!”** Amen.