



PEACE

Sunday 21 November 2021

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests." (Luke 2:8-14)

We're following the Advent calendar on our way to Christmas Hope, Peace, Love, Joy and Light. This is a time of anticipation, expectation, preparation as we look at the foundation concepts of what the arrival of Jesus brings into our lives and into our world. These are big aspirations or expectations surrounding Christmas. And while they are words we all use and embrace we are looking specifically at the distinction that the gospel brings to these words.

Last time we looked at hope: that 'Hope' is not optimism but a person. But what about peace? Everyone talks about peace; but what on earth is 'peace on earth'? When we think of peace we usually think:

- *The opposite of war* – peace in the Middle East, peace in Myanmar, peace in Afghanistan or Palestine, or neighbourhoods, between races, religions, in homes and families and marriages.
- *"I just need some peace and quiet"* – a state of tranquillity, of slower pace, of lower pressure, that sea-change or tree-change.
- *An inner state of balance* – the absence of inner conflict, anxiety, being ok with yourself.

They are all great expressions of peace and the Bible constantly points to the arrival of this vision as we saw last time in Isaiah chapter 9 – and he does something similar in chapter 11. But this is a vision of life that seems as far away today as ever. We see glimpses of peace today, but they are only temporary. There is a ceasefire in one nation, but the war moves down the road to the next. Inside nations like Myanmar there is no peace, between ethnic groups and governments. Peace seems to be a thin veneer over simmering unrest. Same for peace in marriages and families – it always seems to be temporary. Peace in our lives seems to last as long as the holiday, or the new year's resolution. The Bible has much to say about contending for peace in our world and peace in our hearts and homes; but it's always temporary and we still look far ahead to some future that is yet still to come.

If we go back to Luke chapter 2, we read: *But the angel said to the shepherds "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests"* (Luke 2:14). So back to the core question: what does peace on earth imply here and now – so what is peace, now?

The Bible's vision of peace is peculiar: 'shalom' in the Old Testament and 'Eirene' in the New Testament, which is not just the absence of conflict but the presence of something in its place that makes it complete or whole! This 'peace' is about wholeness or completeness in all life. I think of it this way: biblical peace is taking all the pieces and putting them back in their right place. When something is broken down and needs restoring, peace is gathering all the missing parts and putting them back together. And in a relational sense, peace is to bring people together who are otherwise torn apart, to reconcile them and make them whole. Peace is all of life in place, but especially relationally.

What is most in need of restoration, what most needs reconciling, what is most broken that needs to be put back together? What is the peace that we most need? The grand story of the Gospel tells us that we all need peace with God. Paul says in Romans chapter 5 that we were enemies of God. And later in Colossians 1:21, *"Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour."*

Here is where we most need peace: peace with God. Last time in Isaiah chapter 9 we read that Isaiah looked forward to the birth of a child who would have the name 'Prince of Shalom', who would bring a kind of reconciliation of all things with no end. Jesus was that 'Prince of Peace' offering to you through His own body; a way for all the pieces of our lives to come back together into union with God. Paul continues in Colossians 1:22 to say, *"But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation."* And in Romans 5:1–2 & 10: *"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand ... For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!"*

All the other kinds of peace on earth we've spoken about are partial and temporary – and as much as we should desire and pursue them, the Bible tells us that the real lasting peace on earth is peace with God. And you can have peace with God now, today!

How? You have to first admit that you are at war with God – that you have actively set up your life either in opposition to God's will and way; or, more commonly, just passively created in your own heart a god who is just fine with you as you are, that he won't offend you or ask you to alter your life, that he just wants you to be true to yourself, to be kind and to live your best life. I know that's a little cynical, but the truth is we are very good at flipping the story from God making us in His own image to us making God in our own image.

To paraphrase a brilliant thought from Tim Keller here, "people hide the hatred they have in their heart for the real God by saying "I don't have any problem with God" because they are not looking at the God of the Bible but a figment of their imagination." Keller says, "When people get to the real God they hate Him – His mercy is too easy, His holiness is too hard, sovereignty is too unaccountable. We don't want to be saved by a God of extreme mercy so there is nothing you can do or a God of extreme holiness that will not let any guilt go unpunished or judged – that's too harsh. They want a moderate god in the middle who they don't have to be at war with; a god who seems to agree with them all the time... But it's not the real God." The real God of the Bible will leave you at times offended by His will and ways, terrified by His holiness, filled with joy and wonder over His love and grace. Friends, if you don't know peace with God, begin by tearing down the god of your imagination and put your trust in King Jesus.

Romans 5:1-2 say, *"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand..."* This peace is received only by His grace, and you access it by faith, by shifting your trust from yourself onto Jesus who has lived the life you could never live and taken the death penalty you should have received. The way of true peace is the way of the cross Jesus came to die our death; He took our penalty; He was broken so we could be mended; He lost His peace so we can receive it.

Now for most of you I suspect I've not said anything you don't already know about peace. But what really bothers me about peace is why there is such a big disconnect between the peace I have objectively WITH God and the experience of life knowing the peace OF god. Why does peace seem just as elusive and abstract in the Christian life as anyone else?

We have just said that **peace with God** is a gift you freely receive as you make Jesus, King. It comes objectively and permanently as you put your faith in Him. What has to happen for the Gospel to earth peace in our lives in a way that means something more than a happy end to the story?

How do we enjoy the peace of God? Two thoughts:

Firstly, the peace of God is a deep awareness of the nearness and assurance of the Lord Jesus. It comes as you hand over your circumstances to Jesus with a conscious choice to **trust and obey**. Romans 15:13 says, *"May the god of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."* You see, the peace of God is cultivated in the disciple through intention, as we trust and obey through the power of the Holy Spirit. I cannot know the peace of God while ever I'm trying to be god.

The peace of God is also cultivated by the choice to pray and worship. Remember Philippians 4:6, *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."*

I think peace with God and the peace of God are always available for all of life. But **secondly** I want to propose that sometimes the absence of peace in your life may equally be God. Two examples:

In Jeremiah 8.10b-11 he says, *"prophets and priests alike all practice deceit. 11 They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace."* Jeremiah is railing against the popular religious language of his time that put a sweet glaze of shalom peace over everything whilst ignoring the reality that the internal state of people's hearts was anything but peace, and God was anything but peaceful or happy about this fake peace. Jeremiah found no peace in the behaviours and attitudes of Israel; and Israel found no peace in Jeremiah's words because they confronted the real state of things.

Or in one of the most surprising passages, Jesus says the opposite of what you think He should say: *"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law - a man's enemies will be the members of his own household."* (Matthew 10:34) This is a rhetorical form of teaching, well used in Jesus' time, where the teacher uses the extreme to make the point. Jesus clarifies with disciples that following Him will be confrontational to the norms of society, and will be divisive like a sword divides. It will not produce peace, but what seems like division and conflict - and even suffering. So when you begin to reorder your loves in a way that are different from family or from culture, what you may experience is the absence of peace - not only with your enemies but your friends and family.

My point is that sometimes the absence of peace is exactly what you are supposed to take notice of because it is either a sign that something is terribly wrong, as in Jeremiah's time -

or something is right, as in Jesus' words to His disciples about the consequences of trust and obedience to the narrow road of following Him.

In our church over the years there have been lots of time where I have had a real absence of peace about something – and sometimes it's been because something is terribly wrong that God needs me to see, and sometimes it's because of something that is terribly right but having implications that don't feel peaceful at all.

So maybe the question to ask is not simply "how do I get more peace," but "how do I make sense of the presence or absence of peace in my life, and what is God up to?" And as we tell Jesus about it all, let Him give you a peace only He can give inside of any circumstance you face. Just as hope is not optimism but a person, peace is not tranquillity but a person – and there is a beautiful connection between the two: as you hope in Jesus, the Spirit of Jesus connects you once more with the peace of Jesus for whatever it is you face.

Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr is universally attributed as the author of what we know as "The Serenity Prayer" back in the 30's, and the version that most people know as 'God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.'

But it's a shortened version of the much better, long prayer of Niebuhr:

God, give me grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, Courage to change the things which should be changed, and the Wisdom to distinguish the one from the other. Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace, Taking, as Jesus did, This sinful world as it is, Not as I would have it, Trusting that You will make all things right, If I surrender to Your will, So that I may be reasonably happy in this life, And supremely happy with You forever in the next. Amen.