

December 4, 2019 – Luke 2:8-14 & 1 Peter 4:9-14

Peace is an elusive thing. I think we all know that. Just turn on the news and you can't help but be bombarded by that reality. In Wisconsin, there were 8 different threats of violence in their public schools in just 2 days. In Michigan, 8 police officers have been shot in the line of duty in the last 2 weeks, one of them fatally. And our own fair state of Missouri was recently reported to have the 3rd highest murder rate in the country.

Of course, when we look to the leaders of our nation who might be able to do something about this violence, we see an equal lack of peace. Bitterness, accusations, and slander are all our government officials seem to be good at nowadays, on both sides of the aisle. Whether you're looking at D.C. or Jeff City, there's no peace to be found there either.

But why would there be. The human heart is not a place where peace resides. And I'm not just talking about violence or anger. We lack peace in every area of our lives. We covet. We lust. We gossip. And we worry. We are supremely gifted at finding reasons to be unhappy with our lives, discontent with what we have, and unfaithful in the vocations God has given to us. Peace is an elusive thing.

But maybe that's because we're working with a poor definition of peace in the first place. Most of us, I think, look at peace in negative terms. For us, peace is an absence of conflict. An absence of stress. An absence of loneliness. An absence of want.

In other words, we don't actually know what we're looking for. We just know that what we have isn't it. So we look for something else. Something more. But, often, we just look for more things of this world. And find disappointment waiting for us. We lack peace even in our search for peace.

True peace is of a different sort than we are capable of finding. And that's really the theme of Luke's Gospel. Luke has been called the Gospel for the Outcasts. Because all the way through it, we see marginalized, hated, and outcast peoples being featured front and center.

Lepers, cast out of their own homes. Tax collectors, hated by their own countrymen. Prostitutes, despised by the religious authorities. The unclean, left to wander among the tombs. Gentile dogs, unfit to sit in the same room as a Jew. Even a son who does the unthinkable and abandons his home. Pretends like his own father is dead and squanders all his wealth.

These are the major characters of Luke's Gospel. People without homes, without social status, without friends. People without the love of God. Simply put, these are people without peace.

And it is to these people that Jesus reaches out first and foremost. It's these people who receive healing and forgiveness and mercy and grace. Not because of their sin. Not because of their righteousness. But simply because that's what God does. That's what Jesus came to do.

He came to seek and to save the lost. He came to bring peace. Not peace that's the mere absence of conflict or stress or loneliness or want. But the peace of God to outcasts. The peace of God to sinners, like you and me.

It's a peace that was proclaimed the very night Jesus was born. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" On the night Jesus was born, God's peace came down to earth. And that peace was manifested throughout Jesus' life.

And those first people who heard the angels were some of those who needed to hear the peace of God the most. Because being a shepherd is a dirty job. A job that left those men both physically and ceremonially unclean. It was a job for people who accepted that their best friends would probably be the sheep they cared for, because no one would want them in their homes.

And it was to these simple, dirty shepherds that God first proclaimed his peace to the world. And it was to people just like those shepherds that God would continue to proclaim peace through His Son.

Every illness or injury that Jesus healed was God reaching out to those without peace and making their lives a little more peaceful. Every tax collector or prostitute that ate at the same table with Jesus was God restoring peace to those who lived in despair. God was showing peace to the world.

To all the world. This was good news of great joy to all the people. Everyone. Everywhere. What the angel said to those shepherds continued to be true. All those who behold this child receive the peace of God.

Of course, even with this peace being made so well-known to everyone who saw Jesus, they still misunderstood it. Still rejected it. Peace is an elusive thing, even when it staring right back at you.

On that wonderful Palm Sunday morning, the crowds echoed the words of the angels. "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest." They shouted for joy at Jesus' Triumphal Entry. But they weren't looking for the peace of God.

No, they were once again looking for human peace. Peace as an absence of Roman tyranny. Peace as an absence of unjust rulers. Peace as an absence of illness and injury, hunger and thirst. The very same peace that so often consumes our lives today.

And in response to their shouts of joy and praise, Jesus actually began to weep. He said to them, "*Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.*" Three years of work. Three years of teaching. Three years of miracles. And they were still blinded by sin.

The only way they would know peace would be by seeing the peace of God in action. By seeing the love of God made manifest among us, as Peter says in our Epistle. By seeing God reconcile outcasts by the death of His own Son. By seeing God make peace with man through the propitiation – the sacrifice – that is Jesus Christ.

In the parable of the prodigal son, the son is convinced that his father will never receive him back peacefully. That he will have to find peace with his father by begging for a job. By working as a servant. By staying away from the family and the home he had grown up in.

And even after he father runs out to meet him, runs out to embrace him, he still acts as if this is impossible. He pulls away and says, "*I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.*" There can't possibly be peace between us. I've done too much wrong.

But the father won't listen to him. He dresses him in a fine robe. He puts the family signet ring back on his finger. And he throws a feast to welcome him home. Because all he cares about is that this son who was dead is alive again. This son who was lost is found. And they will both – father and son – be at peace once more.

In the death and resurrection of Jesus, we see that same peace demonstrated to us. The peace of a God who doesn't care what it cost to bring us home. He's simply glad that we're alive again. That we are found. That we are his children once more.

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased. God is pleased with you. Not because of what you did, but because of what his Son did on your behalf. And his peace is no longer elusive. It is no longer hidden from our eyes. For like those shepherds, we have beheld the child. And that is good news of great joy to us as well. Amen.