

December 24, 2023 (Christmas Eve) – Luke 2:1-20

Tomorrow morning, in homes across America, a yearly ritual will occur. Children will awaken. Wrapping paper will be torn asunder. Boxes will be pried open by tiny little finger, desperate to dig into the treasures inside. Toys will be brought forth. And then, almost immediately, pieces will be lost.

It's inevitable. And it happens so quickly. One minute Barbie has all of her accessories. The next minute, three different pairs of shoes have vanished into the ether. One minute the Lego set has every piece in its own little labeled baggie. The next, they have disappeared into the black hole of the couch cushions.

How do pieces get lost so quickly? Of course, we're tempted to blame the kids for it. "You need to take better care of your toys. It's not my job to keep track of your stuff. Maybe that will teach you a lesson in responsibility."

But then again, adults lose things too. And our toys tend to be a little more valuable. Stef, have you seen my car keys? I left there right here. Where's my credit card? I can find it anywhere. Honey, my engagement ring just fell down the drain! We don't really have room to criticize. We have plenty of missing pieces in our own lives.

In fact, life itself sometimes feels like just a series missing pieces. Of one thing after another that we are lacking. Sometimes it's things we lack that others have. Family. Career. Stuff. Sometimes it's things we used to have that we lost. A loved one no longer in our lives. Declining health. Just lacking purpose.

Whatever it is, it troubles us. Drives the decisions we make. The priorities we make. And when we can't find that missing piece, we get frustrated. Angry. Depressed. What we're really looking for is peace. Contentment. Joy. So you might say, the search for the missing piece is really the search for the missing peace.

Throughout this past Advent season, during our midweek services, we've been looking at some of the ways that we try to find peace in our lives. The idols of false peace that tempt us with answers. With missing pieces that we think will fill the holes in our lives, but really just bring more frustration and sadness.

We talked about the idol of possessions, that we think will fill our lives with security and stability and happiness. But really just drive us into a never ending pursuit of greed and covetousness.

We talked about the idol of escape, that we think will allow us to simply avoid our problems, ignore the hole in our life, abandon our responsibilities. But really just leave us empty and alone.

We talked about the idol of control, that we think will let us end the chaos by becoming bigger and more powerful than anyone or anything that tries to hurt us. But really just shows us that we're too small and too sinful to be gods over anyone, least of all ourselves.

We try to replace that missing piece in so many different ways. These are just three important ones. But there are dozens, hundreds of different ways that people try to fix the chaos and emptiness of their lives. But they just don't work. None of them give us true, lasting peace. Not in the way that we want. Not in the way that we need.

But that's not just our story. That's the story of humanity after the fall into sin. The serpent promised Eve that by eating the forbidden fruit, she would gain something wonderful. She would gain knowledge and power to be like God. The creator was holding out on her. He had left a piece of her missing. And this would fill it.

In reality, the opposite was true. She and Adam were perfect and complete. They needed nothing that God hadn't already provided. But when they disobeyed God and ate the fruit, they realized that fact. They looked down at themselves and they felt shame at what they saw.

They thought it was just their nakedness that ashamed them. That they just needed clothing to cover it up. That was the missing piece. But even after covering themselves, they still hid from God in guilt and fear. The shame was deeper than mere clothing.

They were ashamed because they had lost something. They had lost their perfection. They had lost the image of God. They were less than what they once were. There was a missing piece in their lives.

And from that day forward, mankind has searched for that missing piece to give us the missing peace. The peace we had in the Garden of Eden, but now lack. And we try to replace it with possessions and with power. With sex and with money. We've tried just about every perversion we could think of. Hurt people in ways that seem unthinkable.

We've used every sin we could find to try to make ourselves like God, as the serpent promised. And every time, we just end up less. We end up with more missing pieces and further from God's perfection. And we know that we should be ashamed. We know we should hide from God, because we are not what he created us to be.

No, the only one who can replace that missing piece is the one who made us in the first place. Who could have just wiped the earth clean of us back when we first sinned, but didn't. He didn't because, despite our shamefulness, he still loves us. He still wants to make us whole.

And so on an ordinary night in Bethlehem, God sent his Son in our flesh. To show us what a real, complete human being looks like. He was a new Adam, as perfect as the first Adam before the fall. He had no missing piece in his life.

In fact, he had peace to spare. Because he spent his ministry replacing the missing pieces in others. Healing the sick. Driving out demons. Raising the dead. But most of all, forgiving sins. So that those who came to him would no longer need to feel guilt or fear or shame. Because they were whole once more. They had nothing to cover up. Their creator has replaced the missing piece in their lives.

We read in Luke's nativity account that there were shepherds in the fields outside of Bethlehem, keeping watch over their flocks by night. They weren't anything special. Just ordinary sinners, like you and me. The only thing special about them was that they were shepherds.

God likes shepherds. He called a shepherd named Moses to lead his people out of Egypt. He called a shepherd named David to lead the Israelites as king. He calls himself a shepherd over his people. And that night, he wanted these shepherds to know that Jesus, the good shepherd, had been born in a stable. He was wrapped in cloths and laying in a manger.

But why did he want them to know? These shepherds weren't theologians. They weren't kings. They weren't rich or powerful. No, they were ordinary. As ordinary as the man and woman that God had chosen to be Jesus' human parents.

But that was the point. The piece that humanity is missing from our lives is something that is missing from all people. And the savior that God was sending wasn't a savior for some. He was a savior for all. *"For behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people."* Every person on the planet needs to hear this.

*"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."* Unto you. Not just "you," the shepherds. You. The good news for all people is that there is a Savior born for you.

And what does this Savior bring you? *"Peace among those with whom [God] is pleased."* He brings the missing piece that we're looking for. He brings the peace of God which passes all understanding.

He shows us that possessions mean nothing, when we have the treasures of heaven opened up to us. He shows us that we need not escape from the pressures and responsibilities of this life when he gives us rest from the burden of our sins. He shows us that we don't need to have control over everything when he already has control over us and our salvation.

By his death and resurrection, he has given us peace from even death itself. For we know that perfect life lived by this holy child is a perfect life given to us, that we may live in the peace of sins forgiven. The peace of heaven opened. The peace of resurrection promised. The peace of life forevermore.

It may feel like there are a lot of missing pieces in our lives, but there is always one place where we find the missing peace we need: in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the water of baptism. In the bread and wine of His Supper. In his Word to us. He is our missing peace. And when we are with him, we are whole once again. Amen.