

The Nativity of our Lord
December 24, 2018
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Peace on Earth

Wild and sweet the words repeat, peace on earth, good will to men.

If you haven't listened carefully to the words of this song based upon Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem *Christmas Bells*, you might just miss the edge of this night. Two years before writing this poem, Longfellow's peace was shattered by the tragedy of his wife's death and then his son being called to war. We can feel in his words, the conflicting rhythms of his life: expectation, loss, despair, and then hope. We are not strangers to dissonance of heart, especially at this time of year. And it is into this dissonance that our Savior is born. A light to pierce the darkness, a hope to overcome despair. Christ comes as peace even in the midst of difficulty.

So let the quiet of Christmas Eve settle in as we light our candles and listen to the timeless story of the babe in a manger. But to fully grasp the meaning of this night, we must consider the words of the prophet Isaiah reminding us that we celebrate not just the birth of Jesus, but the incarnation of hope into a longing world.

The prophecy of Isaiah, spoken nearly 700 years before the birth of Jesus, proclaimed a message of hope to a people besieged by the terrors of war, on the brink of collapse from foreign oppressors. Into this darkness Isaiah envisioned a great light, the coming of the anointed one. This Messiah who would break the yoke of their burden would be named, Wonderful Counselor, Prince of Peace. Isaiah foretold not the victory of a mighty warrior, but the birth of a child, born for us, given as a sign of God's love.

So consider that silent night many generations later, as the homeless couple settled into a stable to rest from their journey. I can't imagine there was any peace at the moment Mary realized she was going to deliver that baby in a barn. The message of hope came not to the high priests or the emperor, but to the isolated, unwashed herders who lived on the margins, in the desolate hills outside of the city walls. A great light shone around them and the angel said, "*Do not be afraid, I bring you good news of great joy: to you is born this day, a savior who is the Messiah, the Lord. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly host, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favors.*" Could this be the one for whom they waited, of whom the prophets had spoken? God had come to earth in the most unexpected way, inaugurating peace through unlikely people. Born to humanity in the midst of fear and darkness, Christ Jesus was God's hope, God's peace for a world gone wrong.

The message from the angel bypassed the professional "peacekeepers" who ruled by military might and violence. This peace on earth did not mean the absence of chaos or war, but *shalom*, blessedness, fullness of life, wholeness. Maybe the perspective of vulnerability allowed those shepherds to suspend disbelief, to hear the promise of hope. Christ draws near to us in our own fields of isolation to pierce our moments of darkness, to meet our fears with the shalom of God.

But our feel good culture keeps us on the run. We cover our losses with striving, acquiring, and consuming. Maybe if I have enough, I won't notice my heart's cry. The angel comes to each of us this night to say, "Do not be afraid." Peace is right here as close as your heart, even when your circumstances say run for your life! But how do we claim this shalom of God, this harmony that resolves our internal dissonance?

First, we must quiet the voices from within that keep us from hearing that whisper. If we are waiting for an encounter with a multitude of heavenly hosts to stop us in our tracks, we may miss our unlikely angel. God's hope may come in a greeting from a stranger, an ordinary call from a friend, or in something you read that touches you. The light is there for us if we can slow down, breathe and let the cracks in our lives break open our hearts to receive God's shalom. If we don't recognize our need for a savior, what difference does this night make?

Second, we receive the shalom of God as we seek to reconcile with our neighbors. When we can be at peace with those who may be different or have in some way hurt us, we offer God's new possibilities for relationship. Letting God's light flow within us, our loving actions are not dependent upon our neighbor's response. We perpetuate peace by being the message of peace to others.

Finally, we claim this peace of God as we catch God's vision for humanity and let the fire build within us to make a difference in whatever corner of the world we can. When Longfellow wrote the final stanza of his Christmas Bells poem, his message of hope touched generations. "Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: "God is not dead, nor doth He sleep; The Wrong shall fail, The Right prevail, With peace on earth, goodwill to men."

We must not miss the edge of this night, that our unlikely savior has come into this world to pierce our darkness. Come to this table holding together your joys and sorrows, your hopes and fears, and we will open our hands and hearts to receive God's peace. Then like the shepherds, we may go out into a longing world carrying the shalom of God. I leave you with this prayer written by a brother in the order of Saint Benedict.

May you grow still enough to hear the splintering of starlight in the winter sky and the roar at earth's fiery core. May you grow still enough to hear the stir of a single snowflake in the air so that your inner silence may turn into hushed expectation.

Peace.... the angel announced. But peace is as much task as gift. Only if we become calm as earth, fluid as water, and blazing as fire will we be able to rise to the task of peacemaking, and the air will stir with the rush of wings of angels arriving to help us.

A blessed Christmas to each of you. Amen.