

Meditation on the Gloria: Glory to God

Luke 2:8-15

Luke's Gospel Songs of Advent and Christmas

Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle

Sunday, December 23, 2007

Fourth Sunday of Advent - Worship at 9:15 & 11 a.m.

Let us pray. Now may the light of your Holy Spirit shine upon us in the person of Jesus, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

“Gloria in excelsis Deo!” “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those whom God favors.” Johann Sebastian Bach signed many of his musical compositions, *Soli Deo Gloria*: “To the Glory of God Alone!” What is, in fact, the connection between peace on earth, the goodwill of human beings together, and the glory of God?

There is an ancient irony about Christmas regarding glory, peace and goodwill, that I believe we experience every time we celebrate Advent and Christmas. It is: the closer we come to Christmas, the more difficult, it seems, to gain and maintain peace and keep goodwill among people...the more ‘invisible’ the glory of God. In our hearts and minds...in our family relationships...in our church relationships...in our work relationships...in our international relationships... it seems, the closer we get to Christmas, that the battle and struggle of life grows stronger. Around Christmas there may be a lot of talk about peace—and a lot less experience of it. While the search for peace seems to accelerate, the sense of goodwill seems to evaporate.

I don’t know about you, but during this season, I often find myself running out of patience; being more tired and worn out; getting more irritated with the traffic; becoming more frustrated with the service; because the intensity of life grows during the shopping and party season. There is more to do and less time in which to do it. Surrounded often by short-fused and somewhat surly people, I am sometimes less enamored with the beauty of Washington D.C. and more interested in moving back to California.

Just this past week, I was in line to buy some items at a drugstore. A man in front of me was picking up his prescription and he was trying to pay for it. The pharmacist was trying to work with him. The man had a wireless cell phone headset in one ear and seemed to be occasionally speaking to the mysterious person on the other end of that cell phone headset. At the same time, the pharmacist (who was from another country, and spoke hesitant English) was trying to discern the difference between when the man was speaking to him, and when he was talking to the mysterious person on the headset. I have to say, I was confused, standing behind them, in the two directions of this communication. They were passing I.D. cards and credit cards, but they weren’t connecting; it seemed like they were actually living in two parallel universes. Both were becoming more irritated. The pharmacist was turning red, but trying to stay pleasant. The man on the phone was showing more and more aggressive body language, getting louder, and sounding more militant. His prescription was there on the counter, but there was confusion about his I.D., his health insurance and his credit card. Dates and numbers seemed to be mixed up.

The people gathered around waiting, watching this happen, began to turn and slink away into the other part of the store. Finally, the man on the cell phone said, “I’m not going to take this any longer. I’m taking my business to a place where people speak English and have competent pharmacists. You are an idiot! If they had any sense here, they would fire you and get some good help!” With the last volley of expletives heard all over the store, he turned, and shot down the aisle, out of the store—leaving his prescription on the counter, and the pharmacist embarrassed. And then I tried to approach the counter, next in line, in the wake of this very volatile moment, thinking ...“Peace on earth and goodwill among all people???”

You’ve been there. In the church, over the 36 years I have been in pastoral leadership, I have noticed a pattern – the closer we come to Christmas, the more intense emotions become, and the angrier some

people sound... even the followers of Jesus. All the while we are exchanging the special blessing, “Merry Christmas!” and hearing the ringing of carols sounding all around us, “Peace on earth, and goodwill to all.”

Why is peace so hard to experience while we are hearing so much about it? What is the connection between Christmas, the proclamation of peace, and the proliferation of pickiness and prodigality that we see in so many people? What does the glory of God have to do with any of it?

Let’s face it: there tends to be some triumphal-istic myth attached to *Adeste Fidelis* – ‘the coming of the faithful, joyful and triumphant.’ In reality, it is sometimes more about the stomping off of the frustrated... and the downward spiral of the despairing. For people in search of inner peace to replace their inner pain, this is also a time of getting in touch with unhealed grief and sour memories. The ghosts of Christmas past may return to haunt us, even during worship. While we sing, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, we hear its resounding words, “...the hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight.” But the fears and hard memories linger and rob us of peace and glory: those failed marriages... those broken promises... hostile relationships... remembrance of family abuse... unfulfilled hopes... recurring fears... sad moments... regretful words... and the memory of those loved ones who have passed away—all begin to spin into an overture of alienation, even in the midst of our call to embrace the Prince of Peace.

So where is the glory of God in all of this? And where is the peace on earth? To understand why it’s so hard to have peace, I think we need to remove some of the hermeneutic of romanticism that often shades the Biblical passages that we read at Christmas. We must remember: there was a rawness and a harshness at the first Christmas. When the baby Jesus was born, there wasn’t any room for him in a busy town in the intense world of his day. The faithful were feeling very oppressed by government. Emperor Augustus was flexing his muscles to make sure that taxation for Rome was secured in ancient ancestry – which was a real slap-in-the-face for the people who attach their heritages to the promise of God. They now had to attach tax bills to those same ancestral hopes.

Also, Augustus added to their pain by making all Jewish people journey to their hometowns during this tough time of year. It was very difficult to travel; sound familiar? Every little capital town of the twelve tribes was packed with guests. It’s tough to maintain goodwill in the crowds and the traffic jams on the streets. The hotels are so full that people had to sleep in the car garages. And what happens if a woman has to have a baby?

I think there was much about life that was to lead to irritation and anger. One’s tacit grasp of peace can easily come to pieces in the face of such uncontrollable demand... unwanted travel... uninvited visitors... and unwarranted financial hardship. There was increased pressure during the first Christmas, and not much peace, let alone, goodwill. Just like it is today.

I was backed up a couple of miles on a bridge crossing the Potomac River a few days ago; it took an hour to drive a few blocks. Now I know, some of you who live in D.C. and Maryland are thinking to yourselves: “Well, we told him he shouldn’t live in Virginia.” I was sitting there and fretting about what was holding back the traffic. Because, like some of you, I like to fantasize about how I can correct the problems of mismanagement in traffic control. When I came to an important two-lane left turn, I saw the problem: A truck was blocking one lane on the approaching street. The truck had parked in a most inopportune spot, in order to hang a Christmas decoration (pardon me – a “holiday” decoration) on a building right at the intersection. It was parked in one of the turn lanes; and so every double line of cars had to narrow to one line of cars to turn into the next street, through a very short green left arrow light.

People in that intersection were giving those sign hangers such gracious looks and kind hand greetings as they turned the corner. You could hear how joyful they were in the honking of their horns! You could see from the uninhibited demonstrations of visceral passion, of course, that it was Christmas. It is ironic that the blocking truck was hanging a Christmas ornament – the very sign of hope and joy...blotting out access to goodwill and peace, with insensitivity and hostility. The glory of the sign of Christmas was eclipsed by the grumpiness of the travelers.

Life was busy, noisy and intense in Bethlehem in those old days. God had to send heaven’s choir to

shepherds out in the quiet countryside, in order to be seen and heard. It may have been that the quiet voice of the angel could not be heard in the malls and the stalls of Bethlehem. Heaven's host would not be noticed with everyone so preoccupied with money... and survival... and their own agenda.

After all, what do shepherds do in all of that space and time, in the middle of the night? While they keep watch over their sheep, they also look at the starry sky, and wonder at the huge expanse of heaven and the majesty of God's creation. An angel can get a lot of attention from shepherds who spend a lot of time alone in the dark and in the night stillness.

The baby was born in poverty—lying in a meager stable manger, wrapped in random pieces of cloth—unlike any royal birth. There were no doctors; no nurses; no medicines; no I.V.'s; and no recovery room. There was no royal glory. And where was the peace? I believe that the peace is reflected in Mary; because Mary understands that the peace is incarnate in Jesus. Mary had a pattern of storing up the wealth of these astounding moments in her memory, and thinking about them over and over, to find meaning for all of it. Mary created the space in her heart and her mind to reflect upon the presence of Jesus, and the God who brought Jesus into the world. I believe that it was in the chaos of the moment that Mary understood the deep inner awareness of the grace of God in the midst of the tough times and places.

The peace of God starts in the heart's presence with God... and moves outward to family and friends... and to radiate into the rest of the world. Peace does not come because we work hard at peace-making. Peace comes because you and I receive a gift from God: to be at peace with God... ourselves... and one another. If we have no inner peace first, there will never be world peace. If the human heart is not transformed by the grace of God, there will be no 'peace on earth.'

Jesus came to work from the inside, out—not from the outside, in. Jesus did not come to bring political peace to the Roman Empire or to Israel. He came to establish peace in the souls of individuals...who would bring peace to relationships... and who then would bring peace to organizations and nations. Peace ripples from the inside, out. And God's grace changes you and me—in our hearts and our minds, first. It is that inner peace of Christ—the resident peace of God, that shows us that we have the grace of God, and the power to make the world a more peaceful place. If there are no transformed people with the peace of Christ in their lives, there will be no transformed world. And there will be no 'peace on earth.'

It is because Jesus comes to bring peace to you and me personally, that there is "glory to God in the highest heaven." The majestic glory of God shines in the face of the person who holds the indwelling presence of Christ in his or her life. Heaven's glory shines on the face of the incarnate Christ—that baby born in the manger. Rembrandt understood this when he painted the picture, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, in the stable at the manger. The light of a lantern held by a shepherd, is dimmed, in comparison to the presence of the glory of God emanating from the face of the baby Jesus, and then reflected on the faces of those who worship around him. The glory of God is seen in the peacefulness of Mary... and the baby... and the shepherds... who recognize what they see.

Seldom have I seen more glory of God than in the face of a person of faith who dies peacefully in God's presence. I first saw this peace in a person when I was a child and my parents took us to visit a missionary friend who was dying of cancer. It was when I saw her face, lying there in bed, weakened by the illness and by drugs; and I saw her peace—that I recognized God's glory, as a child. The glory that radiates from the inside, out—because of an inner awareness that Jesus Christ is personally present, and can make life whole. It is not in the busyness of life that we will experience the peace of Christ... but in his still quiet presence, as we meet him face-to-face.

There is the highest glory of God in heaven... and it has come to earth. It is the shining face of Jesus, the Son of God, and son of Mary. And it is shown in the face of Mary, who sees him, and quietly ponders in reflection—who he is, and what he will do. The glory of Jesus is in the being and action as he grows up and faces death on a cross. that glory blazes bright as it is burns passionately in his suffering and death. The baby was born to die for human sin and evil. It is at the cost of this baby's life that peace can come to you and me. The baby was born to bring peace at the highest cost – to give his life a ransom for the sins of many.

As God's glory shines in Jesus, we human beings have direct access to personal peace. When we accept this gracious and miraculous gift into our lives, it is God who gets the glory. It is glory from the right source that can bring us each peace; it is the receiving of this peace that brings God the glory.

We cannot bring peace on our own. We cannot buy peace. We cannot create peace. Only God can give us the gift of peace. We can only receive Jesus as the person of peace. Peace on earth comes through God's grace and favor. Peace does not come because nations make it happen. Peace does not come because we can make it happen. Peace does not come because we can calm our own hearts and clean our own minds. Peace only comes, as the gift of God in Jesus comes to us, into us, and moves through us, to share in the peace-making activity of Jesus' Spirit. And when we realize this great truth about Jesus as the Son of God, the Prince of Peace, there is nothing else to do but join the heavenly host in saying, "Glory to God in the highest."

My question for you today is, simply: have you received the personal presence of Jesus into your life? For there is no other center of peace in the world.

Let us pray. And so we bow before you, from our meager circumstances and our chaos of life, Lord Jesus, recognizing that you are the glory of God on earth, and that you can bring peace. May your word now transform us to be people of peace, in the love of God the Father, the grace of the baby Jesus, and the community of the Holy Spirit. Amen.