

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 24, 2017
Christmas Eve**

GLORY AND PEACE

Luke 2:8-14

For most of us, the story of Jesus' birth as told in the Gospel of Luke is very familiar. We've heard it lots of times before. Which is a good thing. A very good thing. It is a true story, a most remarkable story of a most remarkable event that really happened in a real time – when Caesar Augustus was the emperor in Rome and Quirinius was the governor in Syria and Herod was the regent of Judea – and in a real place, the little town of Bethlehem, the ancestral town of David, Israel's most revered king, the town prophesied hundreds of years earlier by the prophet Micah (5:2-4).

It is a story with which we want everyone to be familiar, from the oldest to the youngest, because it announces that God Himself has come to live among us as a helpless little baby, born to a virgin named Mary, who will grow up to willingly sacrifice His life on a Roman cross to take the punishment for *our* sins – yours and mine – in order to bring us back into a right relationship with God. It is a story of amazing grace, a story of love beyond degree that should never cease to stir our hearts.

The problem with familiarity, though, is that it can breed apathy. The more familiar we are with something, the less we are moved by it. Do not allow the familiarity of the Christmas story to rob you of the wonder of what actually took place and what it all means. Do not let the familiarity of the story steal from you the sense of joy and gratitude and awe that should fill your heart when you ponder the depths of God's love expressed in the condescension of His Son, who left the glories of heaven, took on our flesh and blood, and came to live among us in order to die for us. May we never cease to be amazed at the wonder of God's love for undeserving sinners like us.

There are many different angles from which we might look at the Christmas story. We might look at it from the perspective of Mary or Joseph. Or from the perspective of the shepherds who were the first to receive the announcement of the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem. These shepherds were not wealthy or powerful people. They were not influential members of the media. They would not have had many followers on Twitter. They did not have access to power. They were just ordinary people. In fact, you might say they were the epitome of ordinary. We might also look at it from the perspective of the wise men who followed a star that brought them to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem where they worshiped the newborn king.

THE ANGEL'S ANNOUNCEMENT

This evening, though, I want to focus on the angel's announcement to the shepherds of the birth of the Savior and the doxology sung by the angels' choir in Luke 2:8-14. While the shepherds were out in the fields with their flocks, "an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and

the glory (the word is *doxa*, from which we get the word *doxology*) of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.” Literally, Luke says, “they were frightened with a great fear” – a *mega phobos*. Fear was the typical human reaction whenever an angel appeared. “But the angel said to them: ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy’ – *mega* joy – ‘that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you: He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped (swaddled) in cloths and lying in a manger.’” Remember, a manger was a feeding trough for animals in a stable or barn. This particular manger may have been in a cave that was used as a stable. It was not the ordinary place to find a newborn baby.

THE ANGELS’ DOXOLOGY

Then Luke says: “Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host “ – a huge angelic choir – “appeared with the angel, praising God and saying:

‘Glory (*Doxa*) to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to those
on whom His favor rests.’”

The birth of Jesus – the coming of the Savior, the Messiah promised by God to rescue and deliver His people from our bondage to sin and guilt – brings glory (*doxa*) to God and peace to all who will receive Him. The old King James translation of “peace and good will to men” is not an accurate translation of this verse from the original Greek. The coming of Jesus is not a universal promise of peace and good will on earth. It is a promise of peace with God that comes to those who receive the gift of His grace in salvation, which comes free of charge to people like us who don’t deserve it and never will.

GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST

But the first and most important thing is glory. *Doxa*. The glory of God. To glorify God and to enjoy Him – to revel in Him – forever, as the Westminster Catechism declares, is “the chief end of man.” It is the purpose for which we were made. It is the ultimate meaning of life. You and I – and all things – were made to glorify God. We exist to bring glory to God.

The birth of the Christ child in Bethlehem, the coming of Jesus into our world at Christmas to save us from our sins, was a revelation, an expression of the greatness of God’s glory, even if nobody but a few shepherds noticed at the time. The birth of Jesus, humble circumstances and all, reveals the glory of God and shows that God does not usually work in the ways the world expects. The glory of God is revealed in the birth of a baby who is in fact the Son of God: God in flesh and blood, God with us, the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth. The glory of God is revealed in the life and ministry of an itinerant preacher, teacher, and healer who changed lives but also aroused the ire of enemies wherever He went. The glory of God is revealed in the excruciating suffering and death of Jesus on a Roman cross, where, in His death, He paid the penalty for our sins. The glory of God is revealed in His triumphant resurrection from the dead and the sure and certain hope we have in Him that death does not – will not – have the last word in our lives.

In the incarnation, birth, life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has revealed the greatness and the immense weightiness of His glory. In the most unexpected way, He has demonstrated His worthiness to receive our wholehearted worship, all praise and adoration and honor and allegiance and love – because He has revealed the height and length and depth and breadth of His unfailing, redeeming love. In Jesus we see that God will stop at nothing to demonstrate His love for us. Do you see that? What then can we say but “Glory to God in the highest?”

The purpose of your life is to glorify God. God is glorified when we honor Him for who He is. God is glorified when our hearts are gripped by what He has done for us. God is glorified when we worship Him with exuberance and joy, with reverence and awe. God is glorified when we sing His praises. God is glorified when we truly trust in Him and believe His Word. God is glorified when we follow Jesus faithfully. God is glorified when we serve Him willingly. God is glorified when we “go, tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born” and that Jesus Christ is Lord. God is glorified when we open our mouths and tell others of His saving love. God is glorified when you and I let our light shine before our neighbors, in our community, so that others may see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven. God is glorified when you and I love Him with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. God is glorified when we seek first His kingdom and the righteousness that comes from Him. God is glorified when we surrender our lives to serve Him and His purposes.

The glory of God was revealed in the birth of Jesus our Savior. And the purpose of your life and mine is to reveal His glory in the world today. It is “the chief end of man.” It is the purpose for which you and I were created.

PEACE FROM GOD

Then, as we see in the song of the angels, there is the promise of peace *from* God - peace *with* God – for everyone “on whom His favor rests” (Luke 2:14). On whom does God’s favor rest? The answer is: His favor rests on everyone who receives this child as the true Son of God and Savior of sinners. God’s offer of peace goes out to the whole world. But only those who open their hearts in faith to receive Jesus as Savior and Messiah and Lord will experience the peace He brings.

The promise of peace goes back to the Old Testament prophets. As you have heard this evening, in his prophecy of the birth of the long-awaited Messiah to take place in Bethlehem, Micah announces that “He will be their peace” (Micah 5:5a). He will give peace to His people, yes. But in a more fundamental way, He is the source and embodiment of peace. Paul says of Jesus in Ephesians 2:14 that “He Himself is our peace.” In another place (Colossians 1:19-20), he says that “God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him” – in Christ – “and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things ... by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross.”

The death of Jesus, you see, was the purpose for His birth. And in His death He has made peace with God for everyone who believes in Him and receives Him as the Savior we desperately need.

Through faith in Jesus Christ and His saving work on the cross for us, we have peace with God. There is no other way. If you know Jesus and are living in communion with Him, you have peace with God. If you do not know Jesus as Savior and Lord of your life, you do not have peace with God.

Having peace with God doesn't mean you don't have any problems in life. You are still subject to pain and suffering, to disappointment and hurt, to betrayal or rejection or loneliness or financial setbacks. You may experience any or all of the above. They just come with the territory of being human and living in a world marred by sin. Jesus did not have it easy. And He never said it would be easy for those who believe in Him. In fact, after a lengthy teaching time with His disciples on the night before His crucifixion, Jesus said: "I have told you these things, *so that in me you may have peace*. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33, *emphasis added*). Trouble and peace – peace with God, the peace that comes from God – are not mutually exclusive. When we trust in Him, Jesus gives us peace in the midst of trouble.

You may be going through something really hard in your life right now. You may be dealing with a diagnosis that is not what you hoped for. You may be feeling overwhelmed by a situation you don't know how to handle. You may be grieving the loss of someone you miss dearly. You may have bills you don't know how you will be able to pay. You may long for reconciliation in a relationship but there is nothing you can do to bring it about. There may be a difficult decision on the horizon and you don't know what to do.

In the midst of all these things, peace with God is your birthright if you have put your trust in Jesus as your Savior and Lord. "The peace of God that transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" and "the God of peace will be with you" (Philippians 4:7, 9). The God of peace *is* with you, if you trust in Him. As we saw this morning, He is Immanuel: God with us. He is *with* you. And, He is *for* you. Let His peace rule in your heart through faith (Colossians 3:15).

When you know that you are at peace with God, when you know His forgiveness in your life, you can be at peace with yourself. You can be at peace with your circumstances, including – or especially – those circumstances that are beyond your control or your ability to change. You can even be at peace with the difficult people in your life. You may feel powerless to change them. You may not be able to change the person(s) in your family who make holiday gatherings stressful. But you can rest in the peace that God gives, and you can love that person with the love of Jesus, because Jesus lives in you and God has given you His peace.

The coming of Jesus into our world expressed the essence of the glory of God, from whom and through whom and to whom are all things. To Him be the glory forever! (Romans 11:36)

And the coming of Jesus into our world has brought peace – peace with God and the peace of God – to everyone who believes in Him and receives Him as the Savior and Lord He is.

So, tonight may we sing glory to God and rejoice in the Savior who has made peace with God for us.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of your Name. Amen.