

Luke 2:10
Peace to Men
Christmas Eve 2015

Do you hear that? Me neither. At the moment I can't hear the loud commercials, I can't hear the frenzy of activity that leads up to Christmas. I can't feel the tension of meeting deadlines at work or school. I can't hear the omnipresent, impatient traffic. In fact, I can't really hear much of anything.

It kind of makes you feel calm, doesn't it? Like you just want to keep taking slow, deep breaths. Like for once in your life, you have peace. It feels great, doesn't it?

It would be nice to always have this feeling, wouldn't it? But we all know that loud commercials will begin to find us again as soon as the after-Christmas sales start. (I mean, there will be only 364 shopping days until Christmas!) We know that there will be stress at work after vacation is over. There will be more tests at school. And I hardly think that traffic is going to get any better. Life will probably be as hurried and as stressful in the future as it has been in the past.

But we can still have peace. The angels say so. They say, "Peace to men." Let's enjoy the peace we have tonight, but let's find a way--in the midst of the hurry and the horns, the bills and the bustle--let's find a way to have peace not just today, but always.

1. Peace in God's heart toward us

On the one hand, it's hard to think of a more peaceful scene than "*shepherds watching over their flocks by night.*" Unless a wolf would happen to come by, there wasn't really too much for the shepherds to do except listen to the sounds of the night. There was time to sit, alone with your thoughts, maybe engage in some light conversation with another shepherd. But no hurry, no urgency, no deadlines, no pressure. Just slow, deep breaths.

But that quickly changed for the shepherds, didn't it? Because suddenly "*an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them.*" And the result was that they were terrified.

Now the adrenaline was flowing. Now their breathing was short and fast. Now they were seeing something quite out of the ordinary.

I can't say for sure exactly what went through their mind, why exactly they were afraid, why they no longer felt at peace. But I have a pretty good idea. It was fairly obvious to these men that they were seeing something supernatural. It was fairly obvious to these men that they were seeing something sent from God.

And who of us is ready to meet God--or even his representatives? I mean, who knows what kind of news a righteous God is going to bring to sinful people? But it can hardly be good news, can it?

Can a God who demands absolute obedience bring good news to those who fail to love the Lord their God with all their heart, and with all their soul, and with all their mind? Can a God who by his very nature absolute holiness bring good news to a species that by its very nature absolute sinfulness?

It would hardly seem so. So whatever news the angel was bringing, the shepherds had to be a little bit frightened, a little bit stressed, and most definitely **not** feeling peaceful as they stared at the angel, waiting.

What the shepherds were feeling here was far worse than that tightness we feel in our chest when we realize we have 8 days of work to do and only 4 days in which to do it, far worse than that

feeling we get when we have 3 minutes to get ready for church and we also have 3 unresponsive kids to get dressed. The shepherds were feeling the fear every sinner feels when he contemplates himself as he really is before God--deserving of eternal death in Hell. The shepherds were feeling the fear of not being at peace with God.

Have you felt that? It's a hard way to live, isn't it? Not knowing anything for certain, but fearing the worst?

It's like when you're in the early stages of dating someone, and you wonder how they feel about you. You don't know, and the not knowing makes you more than a little uneasy. So you spend a lot of time mulling it over in your mind, thinking about things you can do. And so you buy them some flowers--or you go with them to some event where you don't know anybody, but you smile along through the whole thing. And then you think to yourself that you feel pretty good about how they must feel about you.

That's all fine and good, but you **still...don't...know. Do you?** Because what if their standards aren't your standards? And if they really feel that way, why don't they tell you?

And then what about that time when you snapped at them for being late? **Why** did you do that? **What** on earth were you thinking when you made that mistake? Will you **ever** be able to make up for it? And why would someone as perfect as they ever feel anything good about someone like you?

It makes for an uncertain existence, doesn't it? The fact is that one "I love you" from a person gives us more peace than a thousand of our own thoughts about how that person might feel about us.

Unless God tells us how he feels about us, we end up relying on how we feel about ourselves. If we convince ourselves that we're pretty decent people, then God must feel that way, too. At least we hope so. But when we realize that we're not such good people, that we're not even close to being the people that we ought to be...well...then we have to hope against hope that if we were to encounter one of God's messengers, it won't be a message of judgment.

That was surely what the shepherds were doing--hoping against hope, and preparing themselves for the worst.

But--as was the case when an angel appeared to Zechariah, as was the case when an angel appeared to Mary, and as was the case when an angel appeared to Joseph--this angel had not appeared to punish--or even to announce punishment--but to announce the grace of God.

The angel then said to them, *"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great 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."* Then *"a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men--on whom his favor rests."*

"Peace to men--on whom his favor rests." It's a phrase that's used a lot, but probably not understood as much as it's used. These words are not a command, telling us what we must do in order to create peace with God. They are not an encouragement, telling us that if we do our part, God might just then be willing to do his part, and we might be able to meet in the middle known as "peace." They aren't even an expressed hope that there might be something of a chance that God will, depending on which side of the bed he wakes up on, be peaceful to us (today anyway--no guarantees about tomorrow!)

These words aren't any of these things, because these angels are herald angels. And herald angels announce. These words are simply an announcement of what is in God's heart.

These words tell us how God feels about us. He is at peace with us because of this Savior about whom the angels spoke. Even as they spoke, that baby Jesus was obeying all the laws of God. For the next 33 years, there would be many, many, **countless** occasions on which that baby, that boy, and finally, that man would have occasion to sin, to disobey God, to live not at peace with God.

But it never happened. He did everything God wanted him to, everything God **had** wanted us to. And then he did the final thing God wanted him to. He died. He suffered on a cross and took the punishment of the sins of the world, the punishment for the shepherds' sins, for your sins, for my sins. And because Jesus lived at peace with God, God feels at peace with us. This peace in God's heart doesn't change, and it's towards all men, all mankind. That's the wonderful message of peace which the angels announced.

Having delivered their good news of great joy and having praised God, the angels then left.

So there the shepherds stood. Once again, the sky was dark and the night was quiet--peaceful. Do you think the shepherds felt peaceful? Well, it's my guess that the shepherds weren't taking long, deep breaths. Their adrenaline was probably still flowing pretty rapidly. Their hearts were probably still beating fairly rapidly. The excitement of seeing and hearing a chorus of angels will do that to you. But so will the knowledge that you have a Savior, and the excitement of knowing that because of that Savior, God has declared peace with you.

I doubt that the shepherds looked peaceful at that moment, and I'd imagine that a check of their vital signs would have said the same thing. But further down, the shepherds had to feel amazingly calm. They had to feel amazingly calm about their future, peaceful about their relationship with God.

Perhaps for the first time in their lives, they **knew** the status of that relationship rather than merely hoping, convincing themselves.

You also know the status of your relationship with God—because God has come to you and told you how he feels about you. He told you that on that first Christmas when he spoke to the shepherds. He told you that when he made you his child in Holy Baptism. He tells you about that when he comes to you with his body and blood in Holy Communion and says that it was given and poured out “for you.”

Listen! Do you hear that? Me neither. I can't hear my conscience shouting at me about my sins. I can't hear the Devil accusing me, telling me that things are not right between me and God.

I can't hear these things because God's announcement that he is at peace with men drowns those things out, and creates peace in my own heart. I now know how God feels about me. He loves me. He gave me a Savior. He gave me forgiveness. He gives me peace.

So when Monday comes--or whenever your vacation ends--you'll probably be in the same place you were before Christmas--stopping and going in stop-and-go traffic, settling disputes between co-workers or children—or co-workers who act like children.

But you'll be taking long, deep breaths. Because you'll be at peace with God.

And that feeling of peace with God--more than a feeling, really, because it's a fact--that feeling of peace with God gives us the ability to deal with traffic, the frustrating co-workers, and the disrespectful children.

When the shepherds left Bethlehem and went back to their daily lives, things looked different to them. People looked different to them.

That's clear from the fact that we are told that "they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child." On the way back to their sheep, they weren't consumed with a

desire to get back to their sheep above all else. They didn't immediately hurry back to the rat race and throw themselves into it with all their might.

Rather, they told people along the way the things they had heard. And why not? After all, God was at peace with these people, so didn't they deserve to hear the same wonderful message the angels had announced? Granted, instead of herald angels, now herald shepherds were delivering the message, but that didn't make it any less true.

The peace that now exists in our hearts will also lead us to share it with others.

Not only that, but it will lead us to live at peace with others. Knowing how much God has forgiven us, we forgive others, living at peace with them.

The angels announced peace **to** men, but this peace to men will result in peace **among** men.

Listen! Do you hear that? Me neither. I can't hear the grinding of gears that takes place when sinful people clash with one another. I can't hear jealousy and hatred toward others boiling over within myself. All I can hear is peace.

Christmas gives us peace. The peace in God's heart that the angels announced results also in peace in our hearts. And this peace in our hearts results in peace with one another. May God continue to grant you peace tonight, tomorrow, and always. Merry Christmas. Amen.