

Peace on Earth

5 of 6 in *Prince of Peace*

Dec. 24, 2024

Luke 2:1-14, etc.

If you have a Bible, please turn to Luke chapter 2. We're going to dive right into scripture this morning. I'll be reading the first 14 verses of this chapter in the New Living Translation. I invite you follow along in your Bible or on the screen as I do. This is Luke's account of the birth of Jesus.

At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. He took with him Mary, to whom he was engaged, who was now expecting a child.

And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.

That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."

Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, "Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased."¹

That passage will be quite familiar to many of you— if for no other reason than that you hear Linus recite it every time you watch *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. (Please tell me people still watch *A Charlie Brown Christmas*!)

At the birth of Jesus, the angels declare, "peace on earth." We hear that phrase so much around Christmas. It's on our Christmas cards. We sing about it in church. We certainly

¹ Luke 2:1-14 (NLT)

don't see much evidence of it when we watch the news. But have you ever stopped to ask yourself what those angels really meant that night when they praised God and spoke of "peace on earth"?

The phrase has been sentimentalized by popular culture to mean that Christmas is a special time of year when for a few weeks we decide to be a little less selfish and a little more giving. We're told it's a time when all people should make an extra effort to get along with each other— even if it's just for one day. After all, it's Christmas.

Kind of like how on Christmas Eve 1914, World War One troops along the Western Front put down their weapons and sang Christmas carols together— harmonious praises to the newborn Prince of Peace ringing out in a glorious blend of German and English— *Stille Nacht*, Silent Night.

Some troops even emerged from their trenches, carefully making their way through barbed wire to exchange names, handshakes, goodies and trinkets with their enemies-turned-friends-for-a-night. A friendly soccer game even broke out.

It was called the Christmas Truce of 1914. But of course, the next day they were back in their trenches, trying to kill each other.

Is *that* the kind of thing the angels had in mind when they declared peace on earth the night that Christ was born?

Let's take a break from the hostilities just for tonight, okay guys? After all, it's Christmas... I mean, baby Jesus is trying to sleep in heavenly peace, and you wouldn't want to wake him with all your shooting and shelling and shouting...

If you're thinking, "No, that's probably *not* what the angels had in mind when they sang about peace on earth," your instincts would be correct.

In the time that remains I'd like to share with you two words that help us understand the biblical vision of "peace on earth" and why it matters for you, for me, and for the world, both now and forever.

The two words are **location** and **vocation**. Would you say those with me? (Listen to you rhyming! Sounds like you're ready to take on Pastor Kevin in a rap battle!)

First, **location**. Folks in real estate tell us that the three things that matter most when it comes to selling property are: *Location, location, location*. I'm here to tell you that the same

thing is true when it comes to understanding God's ultimate plan as laid out in scripture. It all comes down to *location, location, location*. This may be new to some of you, but grasping it is vitally important.

When the angels declared "peace on earth" that first Christmas, they did so precisely because Jesus, the Prince of Peace, was born to ultimately bring peace *on earth*. It was a declaration of location. Through Jesus, God's peace will come *to earth*.

And as we've learned in this series, the biblical concept of peace (or *shalom*) is much richer than the mere absence of conflict or having a tranquil feeling inside. Biblical peace has to do with everyone and everything existing in a state of right relationship.

A few weeks ago we considered the image of a tapestry as an illustration of *shalom*— with its thousands of threads intricately interwoven— all of these parts coming together just right to form a strong and beautiful whole. Biblical peace is a state of wholeness where all things fit and flourish together in perfect, interrelated harmony.

So when Luke writes of the angels singing, "Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace *on earth*," he's letting us know that in Jesus, God has begun to weave the unraveled tapestry of this world back together again. The angels are declaring God's ultimate intention, in and through Jesus, to forever restore the earth and its inhabitants to the wholeness and beauty God has always intended for it and for them.

But here's the thing about that. As prominent as this theme is throughout the Bible, many Christians miss it altogether. Many mistakenly think that Jesus lived, died, and rose again not to forever restore life here on earth, but rather to whisk people away from earth to spend a disembodied eternity in a place somewhere up there called heaven. But that idea was passed down to us not from the Bible, but from Greek philosophy—from Plato.

So as John Eldredge writes:

Despite what you may have been told, [Jesus] didn't focus our hopes on a great airlift to heaven. He promised the renewal of all things, including the earth you love, every precious part of it... [The thing you are made for] is not the wispy vagaries of a cloudy heaven, but the sharp reality of a world made new.²

In other words, Jesus wasn't born into the world to help us escape the world. Yes, it's true that followers of Jesus who die before Jesus returns to rule the earth will enjoy his presence

² John Eldredge, *All Things New: Heaven, Earth, and the Restoration of Everything You Love*, p. 273, 493.

in heaven in the meantime. But that's just temporary, an intermediate state of being. It's a blessed state, to be sure, but it's not ultimate.

The New Testament shows that God's end goal is *not* to take us away from the earth to live in heaven forever. He has something far more wonderful in store for us. At the second advent, the second coming of Jesus, our physical bodies will be resurrected like Jesus' own body has been, and heaven will come down to earth as the final answer to the Lord's Prayer. God's kingdom shall finally and fully come *on earth as it is in heaven*. At that time, heaven and earth— God's space and ours— will forever be joined together into a world the Bible calls the new heavens and the new earth. The Bible speaks of this in many places, such as 2 Peter 3:13, which says:

But we are looking forward to the new heavens and new earth he has promised, a world filled with God's righteousness.³

When it's finally joined together with heaven, the earth itself and will forever flourish in *shalom* as God has always intended it to. God will live with his people, and we shall rule and reign with him, here, on a renewed earth. That's when God's goal of *peace on earth*— the peace which the angels announced in Bethlehem that first Christmas— will be fully realized.

What this means, as author Randy Alcorn explains, is that:

Redemption is not escape from earthly life. It is reclamation of earthly life... I am convinced that the typical view of heaven — eternity in a disembodied state — is not only completely contrary to the Bible but obscures the far richer truth: that God promises us eternal life as totally healthy, embodied people more capable of worship, friendship, love, discovery, work, and play than we have ever been.⁴

Doesn't that sound so much more exciting and hopeful than some eternal church service in the sky?

"What's on your bucket list?" we ask each other. And by that, we mean that if we can't live out our earthly dreams before we die, we'll never get to. Because you only go around once, as the saying goes. But the good news of Christmas is that because of Jesus— his birth, life,

³ 2 Peter 3:13 (NLT)

⁴ Randy Alcorn, [*C.S. Lewis on Heaven and the New Earth: God's Eternal Remedy to the Problem of Evil and Suffering*](#).

death, resurrection and eventual return— you and I get to go around twice on this earth— and the second time round will last forever, with the world in a state of perfect *shalom*.

Bucket-list thinking may sound noble, but for Christians, it's quite tragic. Because it indicates that we don't understand the nature of the hope that we have in Jesus. If you think your destiny in Christ is some eternal church service in the sky, no wonder life here on earth seems so much more exciting. No wonder your best fantasies are about life on this side of eternity rather than the next. No wonder you have a bucket list. But an eternal church service in the sky is *not* what God has in store for those who follow Jesus! Listen to the words of the song that rises to the crucified and risen Jesus— the Lamb of God— in the book of Revelation:

For you were slaughtered, and your blood has ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and nation. And you have caused them to become a Kingdom of priests for our God. And they will reign on earth.⁵

Scripture says that if you follow Jesus, your destiny is not an eternal church service in the sky, but life in a renewed, *shalom*-filled earth, where you will dwell with God and his people, and reign with him forever.

Therefore, my friend, you don't really need a bucket list. Everything this wonderful world has to offer now, and even far more than that, is yours, and you'll never lose it. Missed opportunities now will be replaced by millions of new and better opportunities.

The new heavens and the new earth, the kingdom of God, the restoration of all things— this is what your heart truly longs for. And it is the only hope strong enough, glorious enough, and wonderful enough, to sustain you now, through the heartaches of life in a world that still knows little of God's peace.

Maybe you're familiar with Edgar Allen Poe's haunting poem *The Raven*. In the poem, this sinister bird— a raven— keeps repeating the word, "nevermore." Throughout the poem, Poe is suggesting that once your youth, your looks, your health, your career, your loved ones are gone— that's it— you can never get them back. Nevermore.

But here is where the biblical theme of peace on earth— ultimate renewal of this world— comes in, and the resurrection of our bodies along with it.

⁵ Revelation 5:9b-10 (NLT)

As Pastor Tim Keller explains, if our hope is just a platonic, disembodied existence in heaven when we die, then we may have some *consolation* for all the things we've lost in this life, but we'll still never get those things back.⁶

And we've lost so much in this life— our bodily health, our friends, our family, our dreams. The books and poems we wanted to write but never did. The music and art we wanted to create but never could. All the places and things we had hoped to see and do, but didn't.

But if, as the Bible teaches, a renewed *earth* is our hope, then we won't just have *consolation* for what we've lost. We'll have *restoration*.

We get it all back — the love, the loved ones, the goodness, the beauties of this life — but in new, unimaginable degrees of glory and joy and strength... [and even these] will be like dewdrops compared to the bottomless ocean of joy that it will be to see God face-to-face.⁷

Our sufferings in this life will be utterly undone, as we enjoy a gloriously restored and unimaginably rich embodied life in God's presence in a renewed material world. The biblical vision of "peace on earth" spells the end of death's seeming irreversibility. It spells the end of nevermore.

To have this hope— the true biblical vision of "peace on earth" that Jesus was born into this world to bring— is an absolute game-changer. Don't wait until you die to believe it. Because believing it now will change how you think. It will change how you view the people around you. It will change how you spend your time, talent and treasure.

That brings us to the second word that helps us understand the biblical vision of "peace on earth" and why it matters so much. Our first word was *location*. Does anyone remember the second word?

That's right. **Vocation**. It's not a word we use every day, but hey, it rhymes with *location*! What do I mean by *vocation*?

Well, we often think of our vocation as the job we get paid to do, but really, the word means more than that. It's about life-purpose or calling. It's about what human beings— including you and me— have been created and redeemed to do in this world.

⁶ Timothy Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, p. 59.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 59, 117-118.

And God calls all of us who follow Jesus— the Prince of Shalom— to be *peacemakers* in this world. That's the very heart of our vocation as Christians.

Yes, when Jesus comes again and makes all things new, there will be complete peace on earth. But what you need to understand is that even now, Jesus' peacemaking mission in this world is already underway, through us, his people.

When Jesus walked out of his tomb on Easter Sunday, death itself had been reversed— and death is the total antithesis of *shalom*. In the resurrection of Jesus, the new creation had dawned. A revolution of peace on earth had been launched!

In John's gospel, what did the risen Jesus say to his disciples when he first appeared to them on Easter morning?

Peace be with you... Again, he said, Peace be with you.⁸

And the very next words out of Jesus' mouth were:

As the Father has sent me, I am sending you... Receive the Holy Spirit.⁹

As God the Father sent Jesus into the world to be the Prince of Peace, Jesus now fills his disciples with his Spirit and sends us into the world to be his agents of peace on earth. As Pastor and author Brian Zahnd puts it:

We are to anticipate a future created by the Prince of Peace through the very lives we live... If you confess that Jesus is the Prince of Peace foretold by the prophets, start being a peacemaker today!¹⁰

What is our vocation as peacemakers about? What does it *look like* to be a peacemaker?

Our passage in Luke chapter 2 shows us, in some powerful yet unexpected ways. The contrasts Luke strikes in this chapter couldn't be sharper.

He begins with Caesar Augustus ordering a census to be taken of the entire Roman Empire.

⁸ John 20:19, 21a (NLT)

⁹ John 20:21b-22 (NLT)

¹⁰ Brian Zahnd, *A Farewell to Mars: An Evangelical Pastor's Journey Toward the Gospel of Peace*.

Augustus was the first emperor of Rome, and he certainly didn't have any self-esteem problems. He declared himself to be the son of god, the lord of all the earth, and the prince of worldwide peace and justice.

In fact, Augustus had decreed the *Pax Romana*— the peace of Rome— promising to set the entire world right under his mighty rule and reign. Of course, this so-called “peace on earth” was enforced with brutal violence against any who dared oppose Rome's will.

In the space of one short paragraph, Luke transitions from the world's greatest Emperor to the birth of an entirely different kind of King— the true Son of God, the true Lord of all the earth, the true Prince of Peace. And Luke leaves us with no doubt as to which King makes the angels sing.

But those angels would not sing of this King's birth in an imperial palace. Rather, they would sing to simple Jewish shepherds, tending their flocks by night, far from the pomp and power games of Rome. It's these blue-collar shepherds who get to hear the angels declare:

Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.¹¹

The angels sang because God's glory— the highest excellencies and perfections of God's being and character— were on full display the night that Christ was born— so much so that all heaven stood at attention.

But it was a glory noticed by few on earth, because it was not the glory of grand display, the glory of Roman spectacle. It was not the glory of world-dominating power, like that of Augustus. It was the glory of humility. It was the newborn glory of meekness and majesty, lying in a manger.

The manger. Luke repeatedly mentions it in this chapter, which means he wants us to take special notice of it. The manger was a divine sign:

And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.¹²

¹¹ Luke 2:14 (NLT)

¹² Luke 2:12 (NLT)

Signs are extremely important in the Bible. When God was about to do something big, he would give signs that pointed toward the meaning and purpose of his actions. And in our passage, Luke is very careful to point out that the manger was a sign. How could a wooden feed box for animals serve as a divine sign?

Well, for one thing, it gave the shepherds something quite distinct to look for. Feed boxes for animals didn't usually double as cribs for newborns, even back then.

But along with the manger, the strips of cloth that Jesus was wrapped in also served as a sign. Just about every newborn would have been swaddled in strips of cloth in that time and place. So, there was really nothing distinctive about the cloths, and yet Luke bothers to mention twice that Jesus was wrapped in strips of cloth, and then laid in a manger.¹³ Why?

New Testament scholar Joel Green asks, when is the next time in Luke's gospel that we see Jesus wrapped in cloth, and laid somewhere?

In Luke 23, Joseph of Arimathea took Jesus' body, wrapped it in linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb.¹⁴

The strips of cloth together with the manger are a sign pointing to the very reason this baby was born. From the day of his birth, Jesus' vocation was to march to a death—a death he would die for us— to save us from our sins, and ultimately bring peace on earth.

Christ's cradle points to his cross, and it is the fullness of God's glory on display. "Glory to God in the highest," sang the angels, "and peace on earth."¹⁵

But this glory looks nothing like the glory of Caesar Augustus. And this peace comes about in ways that look nothing like the ways of the so-called "peace of Rome" Augustus had decreed.

The glory of the true Prince of Peace is that he's born not in a palace, but in poverty.

The glory of the true Prince of Peace is that he doesn't exalt himself above all others, King of Kings though he is. Rather, he humbles himself to serve all others.

¹³ Luke 2:7, 12

¹⁴ Luke 23:53

¹⁵ Luke 2:14

The glory of the true Prince of Peace is that he now shares a solidarity with poor outcasts and powerless victims everywhere because he too was one of them.

The glory of the true Prince of Peace is that he subverted a violent symbol of Roman military domination—the cross—and turned it into not only a *symbol* of peace, but the very *means* of peace.

The glory of the true Prince of Peace is that instead of crushing his enemies, he allows himself to be crushed for their sake.

The glory of the true Prince of Peace is utterly inconceivable to the likes of Augustus.

But the glory of the true Prince of Peace tells us what our vocation as peacemakers in this world must look like. It must look like Jesus. Our vocation as peacemakers is patterned after him, and so:

Filled with the Spirit of the Prince of Peace, we take special care for the poor, the weak, the sick, the lowly, the marginalized, the refugees, the outcasts of society.

Filled with the Spirit of the Prince of Peace, we serve others in self-sacrificial love.

Filled with the Spirit of the Prince of Peace, we live gently in an otherwise violent world.

Filled with the Spirit of the Prince of peace our vocation is to give the world a profoundly countercultural, and yet winsomely attractive foretaste of the peace on earth that Jesus will *fully* establish at his Second Advent.

I would be remiss if I failed to acknowledge that news-wise, this has been an especially difficult year. The world so often seems dark, and far from peace.

But what you have to understand is this. If this world had never seen Christmas, and Easter, there would be nothing good left of it. It would an entirely pagan, Augustus-like world completely bereft of compassion and hope. But as Brian Zahnd so compellingly writes:

The idea that human dignity is to be accorded to every person no matter their social status is an idea that would be impossible without the life of Christ. This is part of how Jesus repairs the world. Consider too that slavery, totalitarianism, and apartheid have been challenged, and in places overcome, not by Christians who sat

back and blithely said, “it’s all going to burn,” but by Christians who believed that Jesus is Lord *here and now*. Such Christians believe that the program of restoration is already underway. Labouring in the name of Jesus to make the world a better place does not undermine the Second Coming; rather it takes seriously God’s intention to repair the world through Christ and anticipates this hope even now by moving in the direction of restoration.¹⁶

To conclude this message, I’d like to briefly go back to what the angels said to the shepherds that night in Bethlehem:

Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.¹⁷

We haven’t talked about the last part of that verse yet. God’s hope-filled promise of peace on earth is offered *to those with whom God is pleased*. What does that mean?

Does it mean you had better behave yourself and perform well enough to make God happy? No, that’s not what it means.

A little later in the gospel of Luke, Jesus is baptized, and at that point, God the Father’s voice was heard from heaven, saying:

You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.¹⁸

What pleases God is when we commit our lives to his beloved Son, Jesus, with whom God is well pleased.

Baptism – Jan. 19, 2025

www.cornerstonechurch.ca/baptism

Have you ever been baptized as a follower of Jesus? Because that’s the means God gives us to commit our lives to Jesus. In baptism, you’re joined to Jesus. You are baptized *into* Jesus’ own life. Your very identity becomes immersed by the identity of the beloved Son with whom God is well pleased.

¹⁶ Zahnd, *A Farewell to Mars*.

¹⁷ Luke 2:14 (NLT)

¹⁸ Luke 3:22 (NIV)

It is those who commit their lives to Jesus who will know God's peace personally, and who will ultimately experience the peace on earth that we've been talking about today. So, if you haven't done so yet, why not get baptized? I mean, *why not?*

Our next baptism service will take place on Sunday, January 19th. If you would like to be baptized, or to learn more about it before you decide, just fill out a baptism inquiry form on our website.

With that, would you join me as we close the message in prayer?