Luke 2:8-14
December 15, 2019

More than any other time in the year Christmas seems to be a time for singing. No other holiday time carries a tune like Christmas. Last week we listened to Zechariah sing of the coming of Jesus Christ. Today, we hear the song of a host of angels over the mostly empty Bethlehem fields.

We sing many songs about the angels song from that night.

The First Noel

Noel, Noel
Noel, Noel
The First Noel, the Angels did say
Was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay
In fields where they lay keeping their sheep
On a cold winter's night that was so deep
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel
Born is the King of Israel!

Hark, the Herald Angels Sing

Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the new-born King!
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled."
Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
Join the triumph of the skies;
With th' angelic host proclaim,
"Christ is born in Bethlehem."
Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the new-born King!

Angels We have Heard on High

Angels we have heard on high
Sweetly, sweetly through the night
And the mountains in reply
Echoing their brief delight
Gloria, in excelsis Deo
Gloria, in excelsis Deo

They aren’t the only ones.

Oh Holy Night
Joy to the World
Angels We Have Heard on High
Silent Night
Joy to the World
What Child is this?
Come, thou long expected Jesus

They are excited and singing because they got to announce the message of peace to mankind from God. Angels about the great cost of peace.

Our passage this morning shows us two different conquerors who brought two different kinds of peace.

Two conquerors
One song

The GREAT cost of peace.
We are going to focus on verses 1-3 and 13-14, but I’m going to read the

“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.  
2 This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.  
3 And all went to be registered, each to his own town.  
4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David,  
5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.  
6 And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth.  
7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

8 And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.  
9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.  
10 And the angel said to them,  
“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.  
11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.  
12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”  
13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,  

14  “Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” ¹

PRAY

Two Conquerors
One Song

1. Octavian the Conqueror

Two leaders.
Two conquerors.

The first leader we meet is the great conqueror Luke calls, “Caesar Augustus.”

Who was he?

He was, Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus. His friends and family called him Octavian. Caesar was a title, fashioned after his famous uncle, Julius Caesar. It would be like if every president we ever had was called a ‘Washington’ after our first president.

Octavian followed his great uncle, who was assassinated by Brutus among others. They killed Julius to get rid of the dictator and restore the Roman Republic. Instead, the assassination plunged Rome into a nasty civil war. Octavian and his army won.

The Roman Republic was conquered by Octavian and he became the very first Roman Emperor. When Octavian came to power he killed everyone and

anyone he thought would be a threat to his power.

He was the great conqueror, and so he gave himself a new name—Augustus—which means revered or divine. The conqueror named himself god. He thought of himself as a man-god.

The senate agreed.

They conferred on him the title of god. They did not just do that, the poets went much further. Octavian was a god whose, “birthday signaled the beginning of good news for the world.”

Another inscription was found in a small Roman city said,

“[Augustus] is the father of his divine homeland Rome, inherited from his father Zeus, and a savior of the common folk. His foresight not only fulfilled the entreaties of all people, but surpassed them, making peace for land and sea, while cities bloom with order, harmony, and good seasons; the productivity of all things is good and at its prime, there are fond hopes for the future and good will during the present which fills all men, so that they ought to bear pleasing sacrifices and hymns.”

Do you see how people viewed him?

Octavian is seen as:

Savior to his people because under his reign there were no more wars or threats of war. He had saved them from the ravages of war and brought heretofore unprecedented stability to Rome.
Bringer of good news to his people because under his reign roads were constructed and as a result trade increased. Rome became prosperous and most people had enough to eat.

Called the Son of god. His successes were so significant that he people regarded him as more than a man, but a god. So people worshiped him in song and sacrifice.

Bringer of Peace. His reign was the beginning of a two century time of peace—the famous Pax Romana. The peace he brought was at the edge of a sword. He killed thousands of people who he perceived to be a threat.

What does a man god do when there are no wars to fight and no enemies to thwart? He would count his conquered subjects. The man who declared himself to be god decided to show the world how powerful he was by taking inventory of all that was his.

And why not?

The whole known world was in the palm of his hands.

- No one had more power.
- No one had more influence.
- No one had more fame.
- No one had more glory.
- No one had more strength.
- No one enjoyed more accolades.
It was time to count the conquered, so the conquering king who would be god decreed that every man, woman and child in the Roman empire be counted.

Luke tells us,

[1] In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. [2] This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. [3] And all went to be registered, each to his own town.

From Rome Octavian pulls the strings and like a marionette the world starts moving round. The world scurried home to stand and be counted. Luke says, “all the world” not because he thought that the Roman Empire WAS the world but because to Octavian the Roman Empire was all that mattered.

The great Roman conqueror himself decreed a census.

One conqueror issues a decree himself. Another conqueror has others issue a very different kind of decree.

Christ the Conqueror

Christ would conquer in a way very different than Octavian. Octavian brought peace at the edge of a sword, killing any who stood in his way.

Octavian brought an end to war in Rome, but he did not bring peace.

Jesus did.
You know the story.

Shepherds keeping watch. By the way, shepherds were the lowest of the low in Palestinian society. There was no job that paid less. The shepherds could not read. Society mistrusted them. There is nothing here that indicates that these shepherds were devout or even God-fearing.

Shepherds could often NOT participate in the religious observances of the day because they were ritually unclean. They came in contact with dirty and dead animals. No one wanted them around. So, they didn’t often come around.

The Angels announced the coming of Jesus to one of the most despised kind of person. We can see the decree about Christ the conqueror is going to be different than Octavian’s.

Verse 10,

“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”

You’ve heard that before, we are going to focus mostly on verses 13 and 14. I want to point something about BOTH about what they angels say AND who they are.
Verse 13,

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

14 “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

How do you picture the angels here? In robes—singing as they strum harps? Actually this group of angels that Luke calls a host—are fighters. The angels constitute a heavenly army. To be more specific we have angel soldiers announcing to the shepherds what?

Glory to God.
Peace to men.

God is a warrior ready to fight for his people, and Christ’s ministry is that of an invading conqueror. And that night in Bethlehem was the beginning of the war. The angels were singing of a heavenly invasion by a conquering king.

This is the angelic fighting force at his disposal when Jesus said to Peter at his arrest,

“Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?” Matthew 26:53

These are those angels.
But the angelic army came to announce peace that would come from Christ the Conqueror. That is unexpected. Armies fight. They don’t announce things.

Imagine you hear a knock at your door and as you open it, you see a regiment of soldiers armed to fight and looking for all the world ready for battle, imagine they say, “We came to announce peace.”

This armies are not gathered to announce peace but to fight. And yet here we have the most powerful army that could be arrayed in the universe singing,

14 “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

They are announcing peace.

Jesus was not a conqueror like Octavian. Jesus does not show up riding at the head of his angel army—he comes as a humble baby. His army that could destroy any force but they were not there to fight.

Jesus came to conquer by being conquered.

Jesus was born into a world that was experiencing unprecedented peace but Jesus came to bring a different and higher order of peace. And they could not contain their joy.

Their song can help us.
Two very different kind of conquerors.

2. One Song

One new song.

The Angels sang an old song and added a new stanza to it.

“Glory to God in the highest,

Is an old song. It is a song that the angel army has been singing for centuries. Heaven has been singing about the majesty and importance of God since the beginning of time. Angels created to sing have been ascribing to God the utmost importance in all the universe.

If we were able to peak into the heavenly throneroom we would behold these angels and many more singing to and of God. If you want to have an extended look at the throneroom you can read Revelation 4.

“Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.” Revelation 4:11

That song is an expansion of what the angels were singing that night above the hills of Bethlehem. What is different and new is the second part of the song.
In heaven,

“Glory to God in the highest,

Heaven offers praise and earth—peace.

and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

Never since the garden could peace be announced to mankind. Glory to God in heaven, on earth. Peace? No.

This earth is many things but it is not peaceful. The natural state of things in this world is one of war and strife.

We have

One race vs. Another
Political party vs. a different political party
Brother vs. Sister
Husband vs. Wife
Us vs. Them

War and strife is the natural way of things here on earth.

So how do these angels announce a word of peace? It seems that if they are announcing a peace on earth—it hasn’t taken very well. We still have:

One race vs. Another
Political party vs. a different political party
Brother vs. Sister
Husband vs. Wife
Us vs. Them

Notice carefully though who the angel soldiers are announcing peace to—

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

Peace is not offered to all in every situation, but with who? Among those with whom he is pleased.

Who are those people? Who are those with whom God is pleased?

Those who respond to Jesus in the right way. We come back to Jesus—we always come back to Jesus. God is pleased with those on earth who trust in Jesus. God is pleased for those who receive the gift of the peace of Jesus Christ.

Vs. 10,

“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

The good news that is being proclaimed here is that NOT that Jesus would bring an immediate peace across the entire world, BUT that he would offer peace to any who would receive it.
The peace that the angel army announced is the possibility of peace between man and God. This is the primary mission of Jesus, to bring peace with God.

What no one realized that night was HOW the peace of God was going to cut through the strife of man.

Jesus the Conqueror would be conquered. The God of highest glory would declare war on Christ the Savior to bring peace on earth.

Peace at great cost.

Earth barely notices the birth of the Christ-child; YET all of heaven could see nothing else. As Earth sat quietly, heaven exploded. Heaven erupted and one group of outcasts got an earful.

God’s faithful creatures cried out to God’s unfaithful creatures.

These angels, this multitude without number, only knew God the son from the perspective of worship in heaven.

These angels who worshiped God the son for countless years in heaven now for get to for the very first time direct mankind to worship on earth.

Jesus the crying baby caused angels to sin, men to wonder and demons to shudder.

And what did these angels sing?

“Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

They sang peace over a world that since the garden had only known strife. Peace on earth could only come from heaven.

There was no peace—not deep within the recesses of anyone’s heart nor peace amongst any people group. The savior had come to bring peace. He would be called the prince of peace.

How did the peace come to earth?

It came on a day when no angels sang. It came on a day when all light seemed to go out. It came on a day when the glory of God seemed hidden forever behind an all-consuming darkness. Peace came on a day that looked for all the world like war.

Peace came the day that Jesus died in the place of all who trust in him. The baby became a man was compelling. He was morally spotless and mankind killed him for it.

Yet behind the seemingly senseless tragedy we understand a cosmic equation that went something like this.

Jesus instead of us, so that we might have peace with God. God made war on Jesus so that we might be those who know only peace from God.

How do you know if you are one who pleases God?
Nothing pleases God like when you trust his son. He sent him to save all that would come. Have you come to him? Have you felt the weight of your sin—the back-breaking torment of regret?

Maybe you have felt the weight of constantly trying to ‘do better’ but even more constantly knowing you cannot do well enough.

This is why Jesus came. Jesus came to save those who were lost in their sin, like shepherds. He doesn’t ask you to work yourself into a religious state of mind he merely invites you to trust him.

We said just a few moments ago that Jesus travelled the seemingly infinite distance between heaven to earth.

He had further to go still. He did not just travel from heaven to a manger. He travelled the infinite distance from heaven to the cross.

That was the complete journey.

We are not able to understand why his birth us unto us if we are not able to understand how his death is unto us as well.

Jesus the conqueror was conquered.

We hear a better message than the shepherds heard that night, because we know the whole story.

We even hear a better song than the angels sang—because we know the whole story.
They knew Jesus had come to save them, but not how. We know he was swallowed by death.

But he who was laid in a manger could not be held by a tomb. He became our peace.

Jesus the conqueror was conquered.

The angels did not just announce a message of peace but they were proclaiming the means of peace. The way that mankind would experience peace is through the death of Jesus.

Jesus the conqueror was conquered.

On our own we could never live at peace with God—but God sent his son so that we might not live at peace with him but have a peace that defies understanding and explanation.

Jesus the conqueror was conquered.

Do you see the reason that the angels sang? They were excited at the peace of God.

Imagine history from their perspective. They watch God create all things and declare it good. They see God create humanity—man and woman—in his own image.

They see the image bearers of God run away from God and make endless war on each other. They shake
their heads and say—how can they who are after the image of God be so far from God?

How is that possible?

And they watch and they see mankind continue to run from God and fight and thrash each other. They prophets of God sent to them and they see mankind continually turn away.

They see the image bearers irreparably broken.

And then they see something they could not have imagined. The eternal one became one of them. The creator became created.

Mankind did not could not have peace so God became man to bring peace to man.

They sang that night because they understood the great cost of peace. They understood that Jesus the conqueror came to conquer strife and restore mankind into what God intended.

God was not going to declare war on mankind, God extended peace to mankind through Jesus.

These angels who are unredeemed are excited and singing and Christmas is not about them.

Are you?

Do you value the peace that you have with God?

- God is not angry.
Peace here does not just mean that he is not angry with you, rather it means much more.

He loves you.
He protects you.
He cares about you.

He gives favor—grace—to you.

- Does this peace make you sing?

It should.

So many other problems loom large, but does his peace inform your life like it should?

We have more to sing about than the angels.

I have peace with God.

PRAY

“To the king of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God be honor and glory forever and ever amen.” 1 Tim. 1:17