

The Angels' Song

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[0 : 00] Our scripture reading this morning is from the book of Luke, chapter 2. If you're visiting with us for the first time this morning, we've been going through a series for the past two weeks called the Songs of Advent.

And we've been looking in the book of Luke, the first two chapters, at different songs that are sung or prophecies, as we saw last week, that talk about who Jesus is and what he's come to do.

So we looked at Mary's song the first weekend of December. Last week we looked at Zechariah's song, who was talking about John the Baptist and how John would point to Jesus. And this week we're looking at the angel song, which is maybe the most well-known song of all the songs in Luke.

And we're going to begin reading at verse 8. Now what we skipped over, and this is important, is we skipped over the birth of Jesus. And so everything that we're reading today is in the context of the fact that Jesus has just been born in this passage.

Luke 2, verse 8. And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

[1 : 17] And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. 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.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly hosts, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is well pleased.

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.

And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.

[2 : 25] And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Amen. This is God's word. Now, you've heard this line before. It wasn't what you said, it was how you said it. And usually that's something you don't want to hear in the middle of a conflict with someone you love.

It wasn't what you said, it was how you said it. But it's also an indication of something that's true, even when there's not a fight going on, which is that any time a message is being communicated, it's not just about the words that are being used.

It's about that there's so much more that you have to take into account to understand the message. That includes the person who's speaking the message, the tone of voice that they're using, and the person who's receiving the message.

All those things are important. And in this passage, God is communicating to you and me that as we consider Jesus' birth, because of Jesus' birth, peace in this life is possible.

[3 : 35] And that's really the heart of the angel's song. They say, peace among those with whom God is well pleased. And that should resonate with you and me even more, perhaps, than previous generations, because our time period from the 1950s until about now has been known popularly as the age of anxiety, where you have millions of people who have as many goods as their great-grandparents could have ever wished for, and yet so often we look at our lives and we say, I have on paper everything I need, and I'm still not happy.

I'm still not at peace. And you may have been to church every Sunday of your life, and believe in the gospel, and you may look at your life and say, but still, I wouldn't say that I'm a peaceful person.

But also someone who has no religion at all. They may say, I care nothing about God, but I do care about peace. I do wish that I had peace, or I would like to pursue peace. And what God is saying in this passage is that peace is possible.

But to understand the message, you have to hear the message and hear how it is being spoken. So we're going to do two things this morning. The first one is to look at the message of peace.

So how does God communicate his peace to you and I? And then secondly, briefly, we're going to look at the habits of peace. So how can we go from knowing that God offers his peace to us, and maybe even on some level believing that peace, to actually working it down into our hearts so that it begins to reform us and reform who we are in our day-to-day lives.

[5 : 17] So that's what we're going to look at this morning. So first, the message of peace. And like I just said, sometimes even before the message is spoken, there's a message being communicated. And the first thing you have to see in this passage is who are the messengers, because that's sending a message in and of itself.

And the first speaker is a single angel. You know, very unassuming, right? But it says the shepherds, when they see it, they are afraid.

They're terrified. And any time, you know, we often paint angels as just this lovely thing to behold. But any time someone sees an angel in the Bible, almost always their first response is to be petrified.

They're afraid because they're in the presence of a messenger from the presence of God. They're in the presence of holiness. They're afraid until the angel says, don't be afraid.

But we're going to skip the first angel for a minute, because I want to talk about the people who actually talk about peace in this passage. And you see in verse 13 how they're described. It's a multitude of the heavenly host.

[6 : 21] That's who comes to tell the shepherds that there is peace on earth. And sometimes when we talk about a host, what we mean is a lot of people.

So, you know, you may go somewhere today and you may say, well, there was a host of folks at church this morning. And sometimes we just mean a lot. But originally, that's not what that word meant. And in the Bible, that's not what that word means.

What the word host literally means is army. So what it's saying here is there was an army that appeared before the shepherds singing about peace.

And you know this word without even knowing it. Back in the Exodus, when the Hebrews are running away from Egypt, who comes after them? It says Pharaoh and his host.

So host is always an army being used. And so with that in mind, imagine what this must have been like for the shepherds. They're afraid of one angel when he appears.

[7 : 20] And then all of a sudden, behind that one angel, you have the army of the Most High God appearing before them. And what are they doing? They're singing.

You know, we're afraid of armies because armies always signify danger to us. When you see a foreign army, you're supposed to be afraid. And yet the paradox of this passage is that the army of God comes, the same army that brings dread to God's enemies, the same army comes with a message of peace, saying war is actually over and they're rejoicing.

And, you know, there's a lot we don't know about angels. And probably a lot of the things that we think we know about angels really aren't biblical. And, you know, sometimes when I think of an angel, subconsciously maybe, I almost imagine like a butler at the Queen's palace.

You know, someone with no personality. They're just there to do what they're told. And they just follow orders. If anything, they're just there to listen to what the Queen says to them and to be stately.

But if you read the New Testament, that's not the picture that you get of angels, actually. When you read, there's this beautiful hint of what an angel is really like and what excites them in the book of 1 Peter.

[8 : 36] When Peter's talking about the gospel and how wonderful it is, and he's talking about how the prophets of old foretold that Jesus would come, and he's talking about the power of the gospel and how wonderful it is that Jesus, that God became a man, and he says this, he says of this gospel and of the incarnation, he says, even the angels long to look into these things.

So Peter's idea of an angel is not just that they're robots, but that when they heard about the gospel, they were blown away by it. And you get this image almost metaphorical maybe, but they're in heaven and they're looking down at earth.

They're craning their necks to see what's going on down there when Jesus comes because they can't believe it. And so when they're singing here, why does that matter? Because when they're singing here, it means they're not just saying the lines that they've been given.

They are rejoicing. They are saying glory to God because they can't believe what God has done. They're shocked. They're shocked by the incarnation. They're shocked by the baby in the manger. It's that their song is the overflow of their hearts, of what they're seeing.

And their song is a response to what the first angel said. Remember what the first angel said? He said, Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord, and this will be a sign for you.

[10 : 05] You will find the baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. Now why would that fill the angels with wonder? You know, these are angels who spend, from the day that they were created, they've spent their lives in the presence of God's holiness and his majesty.

And yet what fills them with wonder is this baby in the manger. And there's a lot of reasons why it would fill them with wonder. One is they're actually glorifying God because they're saying, Who would have imagined that the God of all the universe, the God of all power and holiness, who cannot touch something unclean, that he would condescend, that he would allow himself to take the form of a baby in a manger?

You know, and we say manger like it's a beautiful word, but it's a feeding trough, right? For God to allow himself to come down and to be laid in a feeding trough in the middle of nowhere, a place that nobody cared about.

And, you know, what's amazing is that, you know, the angels are amazed by God's glory, but so often God's glory is most evident in his humility.

They can't believe. He's so glorious to them. They can't believe that in his glory he condescends. One of my favorite passages is Isaiah 57, 15, and we often use it for our call to worship.

[11 : 28] And it talks about this paradox where God, here's the line, it says, For thus says the one who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy, I dwell in the high and holy places.

Now that's what you would expect to hear from our God, right? I dwell in the high and holy places. But then he goes on, he says, And also with him who is of a contrite heart and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.

So God is saying, I am the kind of God who can dwell in the high and holy places, but I'm also with the lowly. That's who I am. I'm the God with the lowly. And what does that tell us?

Well, one reason why we need to hear this is because God doesn't call us up to ascend to him. He comes down to meet with us.

Because if he were to call us up and say, you know, make yourselves righteous so that you can come to me, we would never be able to do that. That's the whole message of the Bible is that we are so sinful, we're so broken, we're so poor in spirit, that we can never step up to God and ascend to him.

[12 : 38] So what does he do? He comes down to us and he takes our form and he helps us in our sinfulness. He comes to us in our sinfulness and meets us as a baby in a manger.

And another way, you know, another shocking part about this for the angels, and one thing that emphasizes the humility of God in all this, is not just how he comes, but who he comes to.

You know, we love this. We love the idea of him coming to shepherds, right? Because there are shepherds in our minds, maybe in your mind, they're kind of like the old school cowboys. You know, they were just rugged men who lived out in the wild and they were neat guys.

But in the ancient world, that's not how people saw shepherds. You know, when you look at this passage, already you can learn a few things about shepherds. You learn that they had to keep night watches to watch over their shepherds.

So there was always one of them awake. They had to live outside to take care of the sheep, and they had to live away from people to take care of the sheep. And so shepherds were these kind of nomadic pilgrims, almost in a way.

[13 : 44] And when you read accounts of shepherds in the ancient world, they're almost always negative. Yes, God describes himself as a shepherd in Psalm 23, but that's almost like an exception.

Shepherds were seen as, often viewed suspiciously as thieves, because, you know, they could come into your village and leave the next week, and you find something missing, and you say to yourself, probably the shepherd, right?

One rabbi from about 300 AD, he wrote this about shepherds. He says, there is no more despised occupation in the world than that of shepherds. And yet, what does the angel, the first angel come and say, unto you a Savior is born.

I bring good news of great joy to you. And, you know, if God had sent the angels to a king or to a queen or to the wealthiest people in Rome, to Caesar Augustus, everybody else would have been forgiven for saying, you know, clearly this message is not for me.

This is for the great men. This is for the men who have earned the right to be approached by God. And yet, the fact that God goes to the shepherds is a way of saying, you know, call that synonymous with the lowliest people there are.

[14 : 58] And it's a way of saying, if his good news is for a shepherd, you know, a man that lives out in the field, hasn't showered in days, distrusted by the community around him, if the gospel is for that, then you have to believe, you have to know that the gospel, whoever this Jesus is, he's being offered to everyone in this world.

That's the lowliness of this message, and the beauty of it is that it's actually offered to every single person in the world. You cannot consider yourself outside of the offering.

Unto you a Savior is born. And he announces peace to them. Now, let me say something about that peace. The manger, the way the angel describes the manger is not the thing that gives peace, but a sign that peace has come.

He calls it a sign, because he tells them to go and find the sign so that they'll know that what he says is true. But it's a sign for who Jesus is. You know, when you read about Jesus in the scriptures, so often he's referred to as a bringer of peace.

So listen to just a couple of these. Isaiah 9-6, which we read the first Sunday of Advent, he's called the Prince of Peace. Romans 5-1, which I talked about with the kids this morning, we have peace with God through Jesus Christ.

[16 : 22] Ephesians 2-14, which is talking about the enmity that we have with one another, Paul says, he is our peace. Over and over and over again, the message about Jesus in the New Testament is that whatever he is, he's a lot of things, but he's a bringer of peace.

He's a peacemaker in a place where there could have been no peace apart from him. And the way that he brings peace is by reconciling us to God.

You know, when you look at your life, and I were to ask you, where do you feel a lack of peace in your life? There's a lot of ways that you could say. You could say, I feel a lack of peace with other people.

I feel a lack of peace with myself. So even when I'm alone, I'm uncomfortable with myself. I feel unsettled. And what the Bible says is the most fundamental lack of peace that we have.

The great, I can't even think of what the opposite of peace is. The great chaos in our hearts is that we are not right with God. And so Jesus, and that's the core of all of our lack of peace.

[17 : 29] And Jesus gets to the heart of that. That's what he's come to do. Paul puts it like this. He says, For our sake, he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

God sends Jesus, sends the Son of God in the form of a baby to become like us. That's why he's like us so that he can bear our burdens. And the manger is just, it's a sign of what he's going to do, that he's going to live a life like us.

And he's going to go to the cross to bear what we could have never born for ourselves, but what is ours, our sin, so that we can become the righteousness of God. But notice, who is this peace for?

You notice I said at the beginning of this message that peace is possible for all people. And he tells the shepherds, this is good news for all people.

But then he says, he says who it's for. He says in verse 14, the angels sing, glory to God in the highest and honor, peace among those with whom he is well pleased.

[18 : 41] So peace is possible for those who are well, with whom God is well pleased. And of course, this is the great chaos of the passage, right? Is that you look at a shepherd and you say, how could these guys be well pleasing to God?

And what makes it all make sense is knowing the Gospels and knowing how many times in the Gospels God looks at Jesus.

And what does he say? At the baptism of Jesus and at the transfiguration, he looks at Jesus and he says, this is my son, what? With whom I am well pleased. Jesus is the only person with whom God was perfectly well pleased.

And the hope of the Gospel, just like we were talking about with the kids, is that in Christ, we can be pleasing to God, not because of anything that we've done, but because Christ gives his righteousness to us.

He takes our sin, we get his righteousness so that when God sees us, he sees the righteousness of Christ and we can be those with whom he is well pleased. Okay? Now, you could look at all this and you could say, you know, this is Christian-ese to me because you can tell me about peace all day and I can feel like I have peace with God and yet I look at my life and I see no peace.

[20 : 07] You know, I am in conflict with those whom I love, with those whom I'm the closest to in my everyday life. And what do we say to that? You know, what do you say to the fact that, you know, I'm offering you this peace, the Gospel offers you this peace, and yet the moment you accept it, you know, you still may be fighting with your neighbor, you still may be fighting with your spouse, you still may be struggling against the sickness that you have in your body.

And one thing we can say is, one thing God hates actually is false peace. So in the book of Jeremiah, one of the reasons that God condemns the prophets and Jeremiah is because they go around offering peace to the world, but they don't have anything to back that peace up with.

They just tell everyone around them that everything's okay. And that's not, what the Gospel is saying is, that's not what the Gospel is. The Gospel is not just telling you everything's okay, just don't worry about it.

The Gospel says, this world is broken, this world is sinful, and yet, there is real peace on offer. And here's how it works. The peace that God gives us, if our most fundamental problem is peace with God, then the idea is that when that peace gets, when that conflict gets a resolution, it begins, you know, like when you drop a rock in water, and it begins to echo throughout the rest of the pond, that's kind of like the peace of God, so that when that lands in your heart, it begins to ripple into every other part of your life.

And even when there's conflict somewhere else in your life, you can look at that, and you can say, you know, that used to make me so unbalanced. That used to throw me off.

[21 : 50] But now, because I have peace with God, I have this anchor in my heart that says, you know, even if the rest of my world feels like a tornado, because God has made peace with me, I know that I'm safe.

I know that these conflicts are not the end of me. And I know that God, because of Jesus Christ, because I'm in Christ, He holds me in the palm of His hand. That's the power of peace.

John Calvin put it like this. He says, believing in this kind of peace is believing that God's blessings are so great and boundless that they actually fully compensate for all the pains, distresses, and anxieties of the present life.

You know, there's a great line at the end of The Lord of the Rings where there's this guy named Sam. After all the evil has been defeated, he looks up at the wizard Gandalf and he says, is everything bad going to come untrue?

And the gospel says, yes, the gospel says, every pain that you go through in this life, the blessing that's on the other side of this life is so great that it actually overshadows all the bad things in this life.

[23 : 05] They don't necessarily come untrue. They happen. They can't be undone, but God can overshadow them and give them a meaning, a resolution that never could have been accomplished without them.

Let me finish with this briefly. The habits of peace. How do you live in light of this kind of peace in such a way that it transforms you? And the first thing to say is probably the most important thing if you hear nothing else is that habits of peace don't create peace.

You know, you go online and you say, I'm anxious. How can I help my anxiety? And you read, well, take six deep breaths and your heart rate will slow down.

And that's true. Maybe that can give you kind of a moment. Your blood pressure releases a little bit. But that can't give you lasting peace. No habit that we could ever pursue can give the kind of peace that the gospel offers.

And that's the whole message is that Jesus has given us something promised in the manger that we could have never earned for ourselves. But what we can do is sometimes in our lives that hope of peace that's been given to us, we lose sight of it.

[24 : 16] It grows dim in our hearts. And so when I talk about practicing peace, I'm talking about how can we fan the flame so that we can see again the peace that we already have if we're in Christ.

And the passage actually gives you two ways to do that. And you see it in Mary and in the shepherds. So what does Mary do at the end of this passage? And she's had her baby and then we find out that the shepherds go and rush in on her.

And you have to wonder what was on the shepherds' faces when they saw what had actually been promised that baby in the manger? What was on Mary's face? And they talked to each other about what the shepherds had been told.

And it says something really interesting in verse 19. You see it says, Mary, having spoken to the shepherds, Mary treasured up all these things pondering them in her heart.

She listens to what the shepherds have been told by the angels and she ponders those things in her heart. She treasures them up. And I think those words are really significant.

[25 : 23] She treasures them and she ponders them. When you treasure something, the way that the Bible is talking about it, when you treasure something you protect it. You put it under lock and key so that nothing can get to it.

And the picture you have of Mary is that for the rest of her life, she has this message from the shepherds that they got from the angels and she put it under lock and key, not to put it away, but she pondered it.

She kept it safe in her heart. So you could put it like this. She protected the memory by repeating the story to herself. She treasured it by pondering it in her heart.

And this was important, right? Because for all we know, as far as we know, most of Mary's life, even with Jesus, was a life of total obscurity.

We know nothing about Jesus' life hardly before around the age of 30 years old. She had so many ordinary days and maybe she had days where she doubted.

[26 : 24] She doubted the promises of God. But what did she do? How did she practice the habit of that peace that was given to her by the angels? She treasured it in her heart. She remembered it.

So, you know, if I ask you this question, you're probably going to hear it as a very metaphorical, theological question if I ask you, do you treasure the peace of Christ?

And I won't ask you that question, but I want you to hear it as a practical question, which is, in your day-to-day life, do you find moments in your day to remember the peace that the angels promised?

Do you actually, maybe once, when you wake up in the morning, do you set aside a time just to read the Word and remember, treasure in your heart, the promises of the Gospel?

Okay? So one way that we practice the habit of peace is we allow that Word to go inside of our hearts. But the other way you see in verse 20 with the shepherd, this ragtag group of men, it says in verse 20, and the shepherds, having spoken to Mary, they returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen as it had been told them.

[27 : 38] So for Mary, the Word goes into her heart, and for the shepherds, the Word goes out into the world. And the angel song becomes their song.

So the angels come to them praising and glorifying God, and they go out into the world praising and glorifying God. And what's interesting is, you know, a lot of times, and this is a wonderful thing, when someone becomes captivated with the Gospel, they say, I need to go.

And so they become a missionary and praise God for missionaries, right, like Pete and Ruth Mitchell. They go out into the world to bring it to a place that it's never been before. But Luke actually makes a point of saying that that's not what the shepherds did.

What do they do? The shepherds return. They return to their old, dusty, dirty jobs, their ordinary life. But the job was the same, but they were different people, and they returned, glorifying God.

Now, we could ask the same question that we asked of Mary in a different way. Do you sing? Do you find times in your life, in your week, in your days, to rejoice in what God has done?

[28 : 46] Like we do on Sunday morning, do you sing, do you sing about what Jesus Christ has done? And, you know, for the shepherds, their singing was, I think, inevitable.

It was just, it was, they couldn't help themselves. They were so amazed of what they had seen. But sometimes we show up at church, right, and we don't feel what the shepherds felt. We don't feel that amazement.

And, you know, you may say to yourself, can I really sing if I don't feel in my heart? But what the Bible tells us over and over again is that sometimes we need to sing even when we don't feel the joy that's right in front of us in order to remind ourselves of that joy.

We need to know the shepherd's joy, and sometimes we find that by singing even when we don't feel it so that we can begin to feel it again and we can begin to rejoice. And so, let me just close with this.

Jesus is worthy of our songs. He's worthy of singing about and he's worthy because he came in the manger. Let's pray. Lord, would you settle this word into our hearts?

[29 : 55] Help us to treasure every day the hope that you've given us in Jesus Christ. In your son's name we pray. Amen.