

The Reason for Christmas

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. Great to be at church with you this morning. My name is Steve, the senior pastor here. And if you've got your Bibles open there, that'd be fantastic. And I'll take a quick look at that passage, which is in front of us in Luke chapter 2.

I read an article this morning by a journalist who said that we are drawing the curtain on 2023 as we celebrate Christmas. And it's a year that you really, that you could only really describe as bizarro year.

A year of great uncertainty and turmoil. They went on and listed a whole heap of things that would classify as unusual, bizarre things that governments around the world are doing.

But also very mindful of a, we're closing the year at a time of great turmoil. It's not far from our minds, conflicts in the Middle East, but also in Ukraine and Russia.

There have been tens of thousands upon tens of thousands of lives that have been lost in these conflicts. Communities fractured, people stricken in life.

[1 : 18] And they're just two of the big ones in terms of conflicts that are in the media in our world in this last year. In 2023 alone, there were 114 wars globally.

We just really hear about two of them. 114. The definition of a war is an active conflict where over 1,000 lives have lost.

And there's been 114 of them in this world this year. Of the past 3,400 years of recorded history, there has only been 268 years war-free.

268 years with no recorded war. That is a meagre 8% of recorded history. That's all. For those who think that religion is to blame for that, of all those recorded wars in history, less than 7% have anything to do with religion.

Less than 7%. In more recent history, from 1945 to 2015, there were only 26 days of no recorded war somewhere in the world.

[2 : 43] 26 days. So what are we to make then of the message that we just heard? From Luke chapter 2. From 2,000 years ago.

That at the heart of Christmas, which half of the world's population is celebrating right now, what are we to make of the promise of peace?

It was right there. Verse 14. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests. Peace. Peace.

That's something that we desire. We desire peace in our relationships. Our world is in desperate need for peace. And frankly, many of us would love peace deep inside of our hearts, in the recesses of our hearts.

We're in turmoil and conflict with ourselves. And the Bible promises peace, and that's the reason for Christmas, we are told. To bring peace to humanity.

[3 : 49] So what is this peace that the birth of Jesus promises, and how do we get it? That's the three things I kind of want to, you know, tackle this morning really briefly. Say three things.

I want to treasure the message of Christmas, and when we do, we find peace, and when we find peace, we start to live fearlessly. They're the three things I want to do as we look at Luke 2 this morning.

So first of all, treasuring the message of Christmas. Really hearing the Christmas story isn't easy to do when you've heard it so, so many times.

I mean, so many times. There is an over-familiarity to the story of Christmas, and to hear well, we know, is the important thing in life.

Not just important in this passage. We are told here that the shepherds were told something by the angels. Then they went and saw that it was as they were told.

[4 : 51] Then we are told in verse 17 that when they saw Jesus, they then went and spread the word about everything that they had heard about Jesus.

Verse 18 we read, And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. And there is an even deeper hearing.

In verse 19, it says, Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. This is more than just merely hearing some news.

You know, we all hear news every day and on the most part, it has no impact on us at all. Those with children know the experience of telling them something and it's not being followed through with.

Probably those with husbands as well. Did we hear the information? Did they hear the information? Yes. Heard the information? Did it get our attention?

[6 : 01] Do we think through the implications? I mean, really understand of what we were told? Well, on the most part, no. The first thing we are told here is that God speaks to and through the ordinary.

The shepherds get an angel and everyone else gets a shepherd. Just ordinary, low-class, first-century shepherds.

Secondly, we are told that Mary is a model for us on how to hear. She heard the news from the angel and then she hears the news from the shepherds.

And we are told she treasures it. She ponders in her heart what she has just heard. The word ponder here means to put into context, to think it through, to make the connections between what I'm hearing and the rest of my life.

How does it explain my life? What does it mean for the way I'm living? It is focused mental discipline. Treasuring is also a little bit more emotional than just mere study.

[7 : 15] It means to keep this news alive. It is to keep the fire burning, to relish it, to savor it, turn it over and over and get in my mind heart to see how it connects with my life.

That is, what we are told here is Mary doesn't just know the news of the arrival of God intellectually. She fans the flame of it in her heart by pondering it again and again and again and again and making connections in the rest of her life.

She takes this news into the centre of her being until it means everything to her. This hearing that she has is an attitude of the heart.

We shouldn't underestimate our ability to hear and also not to hear the good news of Christmas. We don't really want to be like the crowd who just marvels at this birth.

We want to be like Mary and ponder and treasure the good news of Jesus and the reason is because when we do hear well we discover the remarkable promise of peace. Have a look at it there if you've got your Bibles verses 13 and 14.

[8 : 33] Suddenly a great company of the heavenly hosts appeared with the angel praising God and saying glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.

It's a very specific promise of peace. It's peace for those to whom God's grace and favour and mercy rest.

On the surface it looks like well this is just a promise for a select group of people. That's all this is. But you have to read it in the light of verse 10.

The angels said to them do not be afraid I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all people. Today in the town of David a saviour has been born to you he is the Messiah the Lord.

So what Luke the writer of this the recorder of this biography is saying here is that one of the great benefits secrets of grasping the good news about God's grace to us in Jesus Christ at Christmas is that you now have peace with God.

[9 : 51] That's crucial. That is so crucial because one of the great and important themes of the New Testament is that before we embrace God's grace grace and mercy we are in fact at war with him.

Most people don't believe that. Most people have not grasped that aspect of the Christmas story.

Many would say that they just don't simply don't believe in God or that they are indifferent to God.

Hardly anyone wanders around and says I'm hostile towards God. I'm in open conflict with him. And yet the New Testament puts it like that.

It says the mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God. It does not submit to God. That is at the heart of Christianity before it's great news of God's love is the reality of open warfare against God.

Our relationship with God is not disbelief and indifference it's actually hostility towards him. And let me just be clear this is for both the religious person and the irreligious person.

[11 : 24] Open hostility overtly asserting our independence from our creator. Both the religious and the irreligious are openly declaring they want to live life their way.

The religious person covertly asserts their independence from God. You know they do religious activities you know they turn up to church they read the Bible they pray try and follow the Ten Commandments that kind of stuff try to be a good person with the expectation that it wins God's favour towards them in some way.

It's an attempt to control my life and my relationship with God. It's a declaration that I ultimately do not trust God.

No matter who we are in our nature we are hostile to God and particularly in the western world we are committed to the idea that we will only ever be truly deeply happy if we are in charge of our own lives.

The mark of a real Christian is that they come to see the hostility. They've seen not only that they have done wrong things but even the right things that they've done have been done for the wrong reasons the wrong motives.

[12 : 55] Christmas is the beginning of what God does for us through Jesus Christ to initiate a peace treaty. God's grace to us and peace go together.

Those who grasp the grace of God are those who have peace with God and at the very least it means Christmas sorry at the very least it means that for Christians we ought to be peacemakers. At the very least peacemakers are people who have admitted their wrongs, their flaws, their hostility towards God, they have swallowed their pride, they have surrendered to their God, they've accepted his grace and his goodness and they've found peace with him.

And when that happens between you and God it means that you actually go out into a world and you do it with others. A Christian is someone who knows how to admit that they are wrong, how to forgive, how to reconcile because that is what God has done for them.

And we become peacemakers between races and classes, family members, neighbours, colleagues. Peace comes to those who grasp God's grace and threw them to the world.

[14 : 26] So, treasure the message, discover the peace, and thirdly, being at peace with God leads to fearless living. I get that from verses 8 and 10, have a look at it.

Those, sorry, there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified.

But the angel said to them, do not be afraid, I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all people. The shepherds were terrified.

Angels tell them, don't be afraid, because I bring you good news. That's the reason why you shouldn't be afraid, because I've got good news for you. Embracing the good news of Christmas means that we can be at peace and we can live fearlessly.

You see, what normally happens in the Bible is that when God shows up, people are terrified. First time it ever happened was in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve.

[15 : 31] After they sinned, before sin was in the picture, before there was hostility with God, there was no fear. When we have perfect relationship with God, there is no fear in life.

that's so crucial as we come to the end of 2023, because most of us come to Christmas living lives of some element of fear and anxiety.

The fear of rejection, the fear of failure, the fear of bad things happening, the fear of the future, the fear of death. We live each day trying to earn our self-worth and people's respect, and if we don't constantly get affirmation and love from people, we just die inside.

We are slaves to our performance and other people's perceptions of us. It's a life of fear, knowing that ultimately we cannot control our lives.

Deep down in the recesses of our hearts, we are in conflict with ourselves. It's hard enough trying to manage other people's perception of us, us, let alone our own perceptions of us.

[16 : 51] Every time something unexpected happens to us, it's just another reminder that we are not in control. We're especially afraid of death.

In death, we lose absolutely everything. We are filled with fear, but we fill our lives with distractions in order to not think about it.

Distractions so that we can't listen well to the good news and find peace. We are our own masters and we are unqualified for the job.

And when push comes to shove, we know it. We have taken God's crown and placed it in our own heads, so to speak, and we are way over our heads.

We are usurped to a throne that we don't deserve, nor are qualified for, and on the first Christmas, the real king turned up, and we are terrified.

[17 : 56] His beauty shows us our ugliness. His power shows us our impotence. His light shows us our darkness.

us. And yet his grace to us shows us the solution. Verse 11, again, a saviour has been born to you. He is the Messiah, the Lord. He is the saviour of the human race. To have peace and to live fearlessly, we need to abandon every form of self salvation and rest in his salvation.

salvation. The baby born in the manger, we are told here in verse 11, is the Lord. And the word Lord there in the original language is a direct translation from the Hebrew word Yahweh.

Yahweh. It's a significant word. It's the covenant name of God in the Old Testament. The baby born in the manger is not just a saviour or a sage.

[19 : 06] He is the creator of the universe. That's what that word Lord means. If the God who made all things is prepared to humble himself and to come to earth, for us he is trustworthy.

Is that plausible? way back in 1961, the Soviet Union put a man in space for the first time.

27-year-old Yuri Gagarin orbited the earth for about 90 minutes, an hour and a half, something like that. When he came back to earth, the head of the Soviet Union at time, Nikita Khrushchev, said that we have sent someone into space and we did not find God.

God does not exist. There's no God up there. The Oxford scholar C.S. Lewis read that and fired off an article in response called the seeing eye.

This is part of what he wrote. The Russians, I am told, report that they have not found God in outer space. Looking for God or heaven by exploring space is like reading or seeing all of Shakespeare's plays in the hope that you'll find Shakespeare as one of the characters.

[20 : 48] Shakespeare is in one sense present at every moment in every one of his plays. But he's never present in the same way that Princess Hamlet is.

My point is that if God does exist, he is related to the universe more as an author is related to a play than as one object in the universe is related to another object in the universe.

He went on to ask the question, how then do we find God or also avoid God? He first answered how we avoid God and maybe at the end of this crazy year of 2023 this might be a pertinent message for you.

He says, avoid silence. This is how to avoid God. Avoid silence, avoid solitude, concentrate on money, sex, status, health, and your own grievances.

Keep the radio turned on or the television or YouTube or whatever it is he might have said if he was existing right now. Live in a crowd. Use plenty of sedation.

[22 : 00] If you must read books, select those books very carefully, but you'd be better off just to stick with the newspapers. To some, God is discoverable everywhere.

To others, nowhere. It depends on the attitude of your heart. And I would add it would depend on the level of hostility that you have towards God.

Lewis went on to write that he had less advice on how to find God, he said because it was God who came to find us on the very first Christmas.

His point was that the only way to know God who made everything is if this God writes himself into his own story, as a character in his own story.

It's the only way that we would ever know him. If he chooses to write himself into the history of the world that he has made, and that is what C.S.

[23 : 06] Lewis says, is the claim of Christian, the claim of Christmas. It's the infinitely wonderful moment of Christmas, that God writes himself into his own story.

It means that God looks at the world that he created, he could see the terrible trouble that humanity was in, the hostility, the chaos, the conflict, the war, both externally and internally, and he wrote himself into the history as Jesus Christ, the saviour of the world.

And he didn't come simply to embrace us, but to take our hostility upon himself and to die for us. He lost his peace so that we can have peace forever.

And so I'm not sure what 2023 has been like for you. Many people are claiming it's the hope, the year that they hope never to revisit. Look to Christmas at the end of the year and find peace. To the degree that we grab hold of the good news and ponder it and treasure it and play it over, to the degree that our fears will diminish and peace will rise in our hearts.

[24 : 23] What's your next step? Maybe it might be just to wander across, literally take your next step and wander across the atrium in church here and you'll find some free resources such as the case for Christmas.

Is Christmas believable? Christmas uncut? First part, maybe it might be simply this Christmas season to grow a bit of quietness and a bit of solitude and ponder the message.
Merry Christmas.