

WD December 23, 2024

Title: "Peace on Earth?"

Caesar's stupid Census couldn't come at a more difficult time. Mary was due at any time and now Joseph would dutifully spend the next 10-14 days traveling 100 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem just to have some Roman official check his name off. Some others may have traveled with them for the same reason. By the time they reach Bethlehem an urgency has set in. The baby is coming—ready or not. To make matters worse the town full of people and its late. All the available rooms are full and courtyards are settling down, fires are fading, and some are already trying to sleep. Joseph and Mary anxiously seek a place to bed down for the inevitable arrival. A local mother seeing Mary's condition offers the only thing she available, a small cave in the back—Bethlehem is littered with them. Normally her cave houses their flock of sheep but tonight they are out in the fields with her husband and his fellow shepherds. They make very good stables and this night they would many such caves may be full of caravan animals of the many other wearied travelers instead of sheep. Everything seems so Chaotic and improvised—Peace on earth? Not here.

The peace of Philippians 4 which comes at Christmas isn't a peace of mind, or a sudden cure for cancer, or the end of trouble or a cure or our broken heart. That first Christmas is not like the Christmas cards but one with smells of sheep, anxious moments, displaced lives among strangers, and dangers like King Herod. Christmas Peace is found in the promise, "A Savior has been born unto you." When everything is breaking down, when life happens, and trouble comes peace in Jesus is still in play. It is found in Paul's Letter to the Philippians in an important little phrase, "The Lord is near."

Since life doesn't look like a Christmas Card consider Philippians 4 for a moment. "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." Peace rarely just comes. Peace is also something pursued, something precipitated by the actions of the Lord.

In Philippians 4 Paul calls for peace between Euodia and Syntyche, women who have been fellow workers in the Gospel to put aside their differences. Paul gives a path to peace. Let rejoicing replace your division--"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near."—Put the Lord back in the center instead of yourself or your differences. "Be anxious for nothing but in everything by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests to God..." Finally fix your minds on whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, or excellent or praiseworthy...not on each others faults. Whatever you learned from me put into practice *and the God of peace will be with you*. Let the Word of Christ dwell in your richly.

Martin Luther is attributed with this advice: "You can't help it if a bird flies over your head, but don't let it make a nest in your hair." Let your mind worry it will worry. Let your mind forgive and you will forgive. Jesus says that out of a man's heart come evil things. So whatever we let land in our hearts and minds will eventually act out.

Peace is something put into practice. It is not passive or something that naturally rolls around every Christmas. We can't achieve peace by avoiding a problem, or ignoring an issue, or pretending that everything is okay. If we have lost someone and we are not just "ok" even if we tell everyone that. Something inside is missing. If our lives have been turned up-side-down because of illness or finances or divorce, or something else, peace seems illusive. Peace is not avoiding something but confronting something in a process where little by little one can find a new kind of wholeness in God's grace.

Allow me this little warning at this point, however, regarding worldly illusion of control. Control is an illusion because it cannot guarantee peace. But how in control are we anyway? How many times you have pushed the crosswalk button at the stop light. Think that works? Some years back a friend of ours up in Michigan put on her favorite sweater. She was feeling good that day. She's a bit on the heavy side but so are most of us. While at a gas station pumping gas later that morning, she kept getting whistles and waves and smiles. Friendly day right. She must really be rockin it right—at least she thought so until a woman came up from behind the other pump and revealed a problem. Turns out her other bra had hooked itself to the back of her sweater as if wearing it backwards and slightly angled right across her back--it had been hanging there all morning on full display. We try so hard...

Joseph and Mary had no control of the Census, of Herod, of a place to deliver the baby, no idea of a job to support themselves while away from Nazareth. They simply took the next step and did the next thing that was within their power to do. Joseph remained faithful to his bride and to the best of his ability he cared for her and the baby. Both simply remained faithful enough to rise to the moment. That's all one is really able to do or asked to do.

Look again at a simple reality, "The Lord is near." "And the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Peace is a byproduct of God's activity. When the Word became flesh in Jesus peace had come between God and man. It came in Jesus because looming behind the Christmas Tree the manger and Christmas itself is the cross. Everything is in the cross. And on the surface Good Friday seemed like chaos. Jesus arrested, betrayed, beaten, tried in a fixed court and in less than twelve hours from his arrest crucified upon a cross. Within 24 hours of celebrating the Passover Jesus was in the tomb and the disciples were too afraid to show up at the burial. Sleepless were the followers of Jesus. No one had any appetite on that Sabbath. Where's the peace?

The resurrection started off rough too—women meeting angels who tell them of a risen Lord; stones rolled away, guards fainting like dead men. An empty tomb and disciples hiding behind locked doors. Where's the peace. Most definitely in those times it was busy transcending all understanding but peace was there. Even now as we grow older, as we struggle for some level of control with our budgets, diets, pills, and retirement planning, we know at the back of our minds that at any moment the peace that those things may promise could evaporate in a moment. But the peace of the resurrection in Jesus transcends those things. 2 Cor 4 tells us that what we see with our eyes are temporary but the things that are unseen are eternal. It transcends our understanding—thank goodness it does, if it didn't peace for Joseph and Mary, for Euodia and Syntyche and for us would be impossible.

Finally lets remember that this peace guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. We guard what we value. We are the one's valued when peace in Christ does its guarding. Think of a time when you took your kids or grandkids to a crowded public place like a beach or a mall or an amusement park. Did you just turn them loose to do as they pleased? NO! You probably watched over them like a hawk. You never let them out of your sight for one solitary minute. A parent is always scanning for danger or trouble to maintain a vigilance in their protection. Children don't always understand why you are holding their hand while walking in a busy intersection or why we parents are arming every limb with floaties to play in water that only comes up to their knees; or why we sometimes feel afraid when something seems out of their control or why we get so protective about grades, boyfriends, or getting their driver's licenses.

Your protective measures transcend their understanding especially in the younger years. But as children grow they begin to understand and mature and appreciate those things. Protective things are an expression of love and of a desire for our children to have peace in their life. Ideally our children will always have a peace in knowing at least their parents love them and are always welcome. This is the picture of the peace in Philippians 4. It is always there even when other things unravel. It guards the heart and minds—the portals in which we act and do, and are. If this sacred space is guarded, peace in Jesus is much more likely to endure trouble with a strong faith. The More of Jesus that lives in the center of ourselves on the more we experience peace.

Day after tomorrow for many will be chaos. It will not look like a Hall Mark Card. For some of you there will be a measure of sadness because of a loved one we mourn. For others its coordinating dinner times. In any case one fact holds true. The Lord is near because of Christmas. That's where our peace remains and why in joy or in sadness we still rejoice in the Lord always.