

SERMON TITLE: "Peace on Earth"
SCRIPTURE: Luke 2:14, Matthew 10:34

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When Christians get out their big bag of Christmas cliches, perhaps the most popular among them is "the reason for the season." Strangely though, if we actually open the Bible to find *the* reason we celebrate Jesus at Christmas, we'll be super disappointed. Why? Because the Bible lists dozens of reasons for Jesus' advent.

- "Don't think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." Matthew 5
- "God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." Galatians 4
- "The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil." 1 John 3
- "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Mark 10
- "For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me." John 6

However, there are two passages that actually seem to be contradictory when it comes to talking about why Jesus came. In Luke 2:14, at Jesus' birth, the angels sing, "Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to those on whom his favor rests!" This isn't tough to understand: Jesus came to bring peace on earth. But about 30 years later in Matthew 10:34, Jesus very specifically says, "I did not come to bring peace on earth, but a sword." Huh? That can't be right.

The angels very clearly stated that his birth was the beginning of peace on earth, and Jesus uses the exact same phrase later to say he didn't come for that reason. What's going on here? How can both of these things be? How is Luke 2 not in conflict with Matthew 10? So, we have to ask, In what ways did Jesus come to bring peace on earth? In what ways did he *not* come to bring peace on earth, but a sword? And how do our answers here contribute to our thinking about the Advent season? And beyond this, do our answers have anything to do with how we live our lives every day? Yes, but how?

Let's start to answer this simply. Let's start with a definition of peace. Peace (or "shalom" in Hebrew) in Scripture is not primarily about the absence of war. If that were the case, then the fundamental definition of peace would be contingent upon war and hostility. If peace is primarily the lack of war then that means peace would somehow *need* war to have a definition. But in the Bible, this is simply not the case. No conflict may be the *result* of peace, but it is surely not the *crux* of it.

In the Bible, shalom is the essence of Eden. It's the fabric that binds together all of creation in the Garden. Shalom is a picture of oneness and wholeness: God and man together, Adam and Eve together, humanity and creation together, and God and all of creation together. Shalom is about harmony and mutuality between all the parts of reality – each part working the way it's supposed to. So, when the Apostle Paul begins every letter he writes with, "Grace and peace to you," he's suggesting, "May you taste Eden again. May the wholeness that God intended for you be experienced. May New Creation blossom in you, through you, and all around you in Jesus' name." And this is what the angels were singing about in Luke 2:14: "The peace of Eden, the peace of heaven, the peace that was promised has come to earth in Jesus!"

But how does Matthew 10:34 fit with this? Well, the first clue is the context. In Luke 2, Luke is recording something that is the hinge on which human history swings, and we're supposed to look at Luke 2 through the widest possible lens. But in Matthew 10, Jesus is having a very specific talk with just his disciples. And reading this requires a more precise and narrow lens.

In Matthew 10, Jesus is passing the baton of kingdom ministry on to them. They are to extend the peace of heaven here on earth. But Jesus tells them it's going to be hard. They will meet opposition. There will be push-back, even to the point of death sometimes. And it's in this very specific context and flow of thought that Jesus says, "I did not come to bring peace on

earth.” Thus, it is in the context of the kingdom of peace advancing where Jesus says, “I didn’t come to bring peace on earth.” So, how does this fit with Luke 2? Well, as the disciples live out the vision of peace coming to earth (Luke 2), the results of receiving and extending true peace aren’t always peaceful (Matthew 10).

If you are following the way of shalom that is the gospel, you will encounter antagonism, and that might lead to a division with your old way of life, even relationships. You will be divided out from those who are still trying to make life work on their own, and the results might not be pretty. But what should peace do when it meets opposition? Should it fight back? Should it retaliate? No. Rather, it should engage peacefully. Jesus’ kingdom of peace doesn’t advance like the temporal kingdoms of the earth. The kingdom of peace doesn’t expand through manipulation, coercion, or force. Rather, when true peace meets defiance, it graciously makes a way forward. And how do we know this, because we can see this in Jesus from the cradle all the way to the cross.

And Jesus peacefully taking our sin into himself at the cross and not fighting back means that we are liberated from fighting force with force. Now, when opposition or hostility presses in, when families are divided, when you can’t take another second of political mud-slinging, when the relationship is at its breaking point, the peace of the gospel invites you to take a deep breath, and patiently trust, prayerfully hope, and sacrificially love. And in these things, Jesus humbly continues his reign of peace.

The good news of Christmas is that, even though it might be met with some resistance (Matthew 10), God wants to bring lasting ‘peace on earth’ into every crevice and corner of our lives. Jesus’ birth is the simplest proof of this. And as we lean into this, Paul reminds us, “In Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ, for he himself is our peace” (Ephesians 2). And as we turn our lives towards Jesus, may we not only be recipients but conduits of the shalom that he gives.

For Discussion:

- What does peace/shalom mean in the Bible?
- Who is someone you know who lives at peace with God and others?
- How does the phrase “peace on earth” in Luke 2:14 relate to the same phrase in Matthew 10:34?
- Right now in your life, where are you experiencing the greatest lack of peace? How do you think Jesus wants to bring his reign of peace into that?
- How are both the cradle of Jesus’ birth and the cross of Jesus’ death both commentaries on God’s reign of peace?
- Personally, what stood out to you the most about this message?