

Britt Carlson
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11 o'clock am

Community Church of Issaquah
Issaquah, Washington

"Songs for a Savior: The Song of the Angels"

Luke 2:1-32

"Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

Peace. Peace on earth, goodwill to men.

Peace. A word that's stuck on bumper stickers, and flashed on fingers.

Peace. Something that we all want and yet so often seems fleeting in our lives.

Peace. It's what the angels declared, but as Mary holds that newborn baby in her arms, the angels aren't the only ones declaring peace.

You see, the *Roman Empire* has declared peace. It is the time of the *Pax Romana*. The Roman Peace—a period that had started thirty years earlier under the leadership of Emperor Augustus and had been marked by a lack of open rebellion.

Now all of this might not make any sense if you remember what we learned about Emperor Augustus last week. We learned last week that Augustus has dominated a huge amount of territory. He has set up censuses like the one that brought Mary and Joseph to Jerusalem. In fact, one thing I didn't mention is that those censuses were used to figure out taxation and to draft into military service. One commentator says it best: "Romans regarded peace not as an absence of war, but the rare situation that existed when all opponents had been beaten down and lost the ability to resist."¹

Peace. *Roman* peace.

Now for bringing that peace, Augustus is highly lauded. He is called the "imperator of land and

sea, the benefactor and savior of the whole world, son of a God." Word on the street, maybe even god himself! But oh no no Augustus would say. I am not a god, Julius Caesar, my adopted father, he was a god, I am merely the *son* of a god. But whatever Augustus said, that line between god and merely son of a god is pretty hazy, and anyway even if your emperor is only the "son of a god" that still means you better obey him... or else.

Peace. Peace I give to you, but not like the world gives. *Pax Romana* is how the world gives peace. It says peace where there is no peace. The world says peace, but what happened in some fields way out in the country two thousand years ago calls the *Pax Romana* and the *Pax Americana* and any peace that isn't God's peace into question.

Because outside of the little town of Bethlehem, during the days of the *Pax Romana* and the reign of Emperor Augustus, something miraculous happened. Angels appeared to shepherds!

Now if governors and kings were here on the social scale, and wealthy businessmen were here, and priests were here, well poor, twelve year old girls and shepherds were here. Like Mary, the shepherds would have been about the last people imaginable to think that God would show up to.

It's like if God's glory showed up today: Wouldn't we think that if God appeared to us it would be here in a church building? Or if not in our church, maybe Issaquah Christian or Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran? Well, the angels appearing to the shepherds at night would be like divine messengers showing up on the midnight shift at the Taco Bell over across the street. It

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pax_Romana

would have been like God's glory streaming across the frying pans and the cash registers.

Can you imagine? No wonder the shepherds were terrified! They had absolutely no context for what was happening.

You see, the logical place for God to appear would have been the temple. The temple is where God's glory dwelt. And if you remember back to the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Zechariah was in the temple when the angel appeared to him. It's no surprise that the angel appeared to him there—I mean, it's the temple! And Zechariah was burning incense in the Holy Place—the inner court where he would have only been allowed to go once in his entire life, the closest to God's presence he would have ever been, a place where most people would have never been inside ever during their lifetimes.

But now, something absolutely astounding has happened. *God's glory has been released from the temple and has shown up out on a farm.* The divine is no longer constrained by walls, but is going out into the world. Like the father who runs to the prodigal son, like the angels going to the lowly, outsider shepherds, so does God's very presence leave the temple and show up in the fields in the middle of the night.

This past week at our Sharing the Adventure time, we went around to deliver cookies to our neighbors here at Gilman's Corner. I think for all of us it was a stretch. Talking to people we don't know...going into businesses where we don't know if we'll be welcome or not... But you know why we went? It wasn't just a nice gesture of holiday cheer. We went out to our neighbors because God went out to us. Two thousand years ago God's glory shone upon us. God didn't stick to himself up in heaven, minding his own business, enjoying the company of being Father, Son and Holy Spirit. No. Yahweh. The I-am-who-I-am. The I-will-be-who-I-will-be didn't stay within the walls but went out into the world.

A people who worship this God, a people who worship Yahweh, are a people with a mission. Having a mission is about going out to be with one another. It's about showing up among unexpected people in the places where we might not have originally thought God would show up. It's about not being afraid to make fools of ourselves because God didn't fear being foolish when earthly and divine met in the lowly fields by night.

You know, I wonder if this is why the stories of missionaries so often resonate with us. Maybe they remind us that our fundamental identity is a people going out, a people leaving their churches and going out into the fields.

One of my favorite missionary stories is that of a man named Bruce Olsen who was and still is a missionary to the Motilone Indians in the jungles of Colombia. He has an utterly incredible story, but at one point, Bruce is just trying to figure out how to communicate the Gospel to this group of people who have no context for what God did in Jesus. He tells this story:

“Suddenly I remembered one of the [Motilone] legends about a man who had become an ant. He had been sitting on the trail after a hunt and had noticed some ants trying to build a home. He'd wanted to help them make a good home, like the Motilone home, so he'd begun digging in the dirt. But because he was so big and so unknown, the ants had been afraid and had run away. Then, quite miraculously, he had become an ant. He thought like an ant, looked like an ant, and spoke the language of an ant. He lived with the ants, and they came to trust him.

He told them one day that he was not really an ant, but a Motilone and that he had once tried to help them improve their home, but he had scared them.

The ants said their equivalent of “No kidding? That was you?” And they laughed at him, because he didn’t look like the huge and fearful thing that had moved the dirt before.

But at that moment he was turned back into a Motilone and began to move the dirt into the shape of a Motilone home. This time the ants recognized him and let him do his work, because they knew he wouldn’t harm them.”²

Bruce remembered this story and said to the Motilone, This is what God did in Jesus all of those years ago. God became small and weak like an ant. God took on flesh and became like us so that we could see him and not run away in fear.

Community Church. This is why the angels can sing peace among those whom God favors. This is the foundation of *true* peace: God becoming small and weak. The Lord becoming like us. And not just like any of us but like the weakest of us: a baby, a poor baby, completely dependent upon its parents, vulnerable to the whims of anyone and anything. That baby is the true peace that came into the world and the world knew it not.

See Emperor Augustus is an example of how the world thinks. He thought that if you came in loud enough and strong enough, if you just organized things well enough, if you recruited strong leaders into positions of power, if you weren’t afraid to use a little force, then there could be peace. But what kind of peace does that bring? It brings a Roman peace—a peace of the strong and the violent, a peace that makes the ants scatter, makes them hide in fear.

But the peace that God brings is the peace of the small and the weak. The peace of the mightiest of all taking the form of the weakest of all.

That is where the whole direction of Luke’s Gospel has been going. The closer we get to Jesus’ birth, the more and more humble things become. First there were Zechariah and Elizabeth—a priest and his wife. Respected and yet barren. Then there was the preteen Mary. Betrothed but unwed. Then there were shepherds out in the middle of nowhere with their sheep.

This is the direction of God’s story. It’s a story whose direction is down and out. It goes down, down, down until we get to Jesus. And then it goes out, out, out into the world. It’s like a centrifuge whose energy constantly spins outward, moving everyone who gets caught up in its glory out. It’s a constant moving down to the Savior lying in a manger and out of the temple into the fields, to the outer edges of all humanity.

You know, a couple of times these past few weeks, I’ve heard Duane telling people that if Jesus was really human then all wasn’t not “calm and bright” on that Christmas morning. If Jesus was really a human baby then Jesus was probably wailing away in that manger. He probably had a lot of needs and wasn’t some meek and mild cherub lying there angel-eyed in his makeshift crib.

I couldn’t agree with Duane more. Jesus took on all that it means to be human. He took on all of our weaknesses, all of our needs, he took on flesh to dwell among us.

In a few minutes we’re going to sing Silent Night. I think maybe some Christmas carol writers did think that Jesus was some silent, calm infant. But when *we* sing of that calm, silent night, we’re not singing about the disposition of the infant Jesus. We’re singing about the calm and peace that we’ve found in our lives because of that baby. We’re singing because Augustus has been revealed as an impostor—a false son of God. We’re singing that because the true Son of God has taken on the most humble of all human

² Bruce Olsen, “Bruchko”

flesh, we have a peace that pervades our lives. A stillness, a calmness that the world can't give. A peace that only comes from knowing that God didn't consider the world's glory to be divine glory. Peace from knowing that God didn't stay up there, but that God came here.

So peace to you all. Peace from a God who went out and came down. The eternal peace of Jesus Christ, wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.

“Joy to the world, the Lord has come. Let earth receive her king.” Amen and amen.