

“Luke’s Christmas Carols: Gloria In Excelsis”
Luke 2:1-20

December 22, 2013

SI: We’re studying the four songs of Christmas in first two chapters of Luke.

This beautiful Christmas morning we come to the shortest song—
song the angels sang to the shepherds.

Read the whole story starting in verse 1.

INTRO: One of the features of life in America these days is that Christmas has become controversial. It's one of the battlegrounds of the culture war. There are those who defend the public celebration of Christmas as a matter of religious freedom. And there are those who are opposed to it because they see it as an intolerant imposition of religious beliefs.

Every year around this time, there are news stories about this Christmas conflict. I read one a few weeks ago titled "Naughty or Nice?" It's a listing by the American Family Association of major retailers and whether they are for or against Christmas. Those that are for Christmas use Christmas words and carols and pictures in their advertising, displays. Allow employees to say, "Merry Christmas" to customers. Those that are against Christmas do the opposite. Don't advertise or acknowledge.

The American Family Association urges you to shop in the pro-Christmas stores and to boycott the anti-Christmas stores. Fortunately, the pro-Christmas list is about five times longer, and it includes Lowes. I love Lowes. But I was most interested in reading the list of anti-Christmas stores so I would know where I'm not supposed to shop.

The top of the anti-Christmas list was Barnes & Noble Bookstore. That disappointed me because Allison and I like that store. It's one of our favorite dates. So I'm just going to have to break the boycott. Also on the list: Pet Smart.

I went into a pet store once and the smell nauseated me. I'm boycotting Pet Smart, doggone it. A bunch of scrooges. Radio Shack. Sometimes we buy batteries from Radio Shack for our wireless microphones here at the church. I'll have to think about that.

There is one more anti-Christmas store on this list that I have mixed feelings about. Because I just can't picture Christmas decorations in this store. In fact, when I imagine a nativity set with Joseph, shepherds, and especially the virgin Mary, it's just too weird. What's the store? Victoria's Secret.

This morning we are not going bemoan the fact that Christmas has become controversial in America, and wring our hands and plot boycotts. Because in a very important sense,

we agree with the people who are against Christmas.
We have something in common with folks who protest nativity sets in public parks
and who hate hearing Wal-Mart greeters say Merry Christmas.

This is our point of agreement.

They say Christmas is divisive—and we agree. Christmas is divisive.

We celebrate that divisiveness. We rejoice in it. We sing about it.

The birth of Jesus Christ divides the world.

into those who believe in him as Savior and those who don't.

Christmas is not a tame holiday.

It's not about Santa Claus finding out who's naughty and who's nice.

(I have nothing against Santa Claus. I like him.)

But the message of Christmas is not that all paths lead to God—
and that everyone who tries to be good gets there.

The message is that the peace of God only comes to those on whom his favor rests.

And those on whom his favor rests are only those connected to Jesus.

That's divisive. That's exclusive.

There is one way to God and that is through Jesus Christ.

That is the message of Christmas that people don't like.

So they either attack it head on or they continue to celebrate Christmas after a
fashion—but try to make it bland and generic celebration of peace and goodwill.

The song of the angels captures the glorious divisiveness of Christmas.

There are three truths revealed in their song.

Let's look at them now.

MP#1 All people are by nature at war with God.

The King James Version translates the angels' song with three sentences.

Glory to God in the highest. Peace on earth. Good will to men.

That is the Bible translation found on all Christmas cards and decorations, songs.

One most people are familiar with.

Most people have taken "Peace on earth" to refer to political peace.

Think it refers to the wars that nations fight against each other.

So Christmas and the birth of Jesus is somehow about world peace.

There is certainly nothing divisive about that.

Who is not for world peace?

Every Miss America contestant, when asked what she would do if President says she will work for world peace.

But the angels were not singing about world peace

in the sense of nations no longer going to war.

Jesus himself didn't promise world peace in this age.

Until he comes again there will be wars and rumors of wars, nation against nation.

NIV and other newer translations are more accurate—two clauses.

Glory to God in the highest;

on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests (or those with whom he is pleased).

Christmas is not about political peace that comes somehow to all nations.

It's about peace that comes to particular people, those on whom God's favor rests.

In just a moment, will talk about that favor.

But first: What kind of peace does God give to particular people through Christ?

All religions of the world promise peace in the sense of inner peacefulness.

Follow their teachings, meditate or pray or practice certain rituals and you will feel peaceful inside.

Christianity also promises inner peace. In the Bible it's called the peace of God.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and petition make your requests known unto God, and the peace of God that transcends understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

But there is another kind of peace that Scripture speaks of which is unique to the Christian faith. Bible calls it peace with God.

Reason we need peace with God is because we are by nature at war with him.

Bible says we are all born in conflict with God.

And we continue that conflict through our selfish rebellion against moral laws.

Romans 8 says the sinful mind is hostile to God.

We want to live our lives in our own way.

That's war against God and it always brings destruction.

Jesus came to end our warfare with God by bringing us forgiveness of sins
and new hearts that love God as Father.

If he had not, we would have been destroyed in our rebellion.

This is a divisive teaching. Because people don't like what it says about them.

Have you ever seen a child having a temper tantrum in a store?

Maybe you've seen one while doing your Christmas shopping.

The child sees something he wants and grabs it.

His mother says, "No" and puts it back on the shelf—and the child tries to die!

Even if he's too young to articulate thoughts, this is what's going on inside:

I know what will make me happy.

I am the only person qualified to know what will make me happy.

That toy, candy is what I must have in order to be happy.

This person, this hateful enemy, is standing between me and my happiness.

As people grow up, their hearts don't naturally change, just more sophisticated.

All our selfishness and anger is essentially warfare against God.

Someone has said that the national anthem of hell could be the Frank Sinatra song:

"I Did It My Way" My way, not God's way—way to destruction.

This is divisive. People don't like what it says about them—sinful.

Don't like what it says about God—he holds accountable.

This is what is wrong with Christianity—all the guilt, all the repression.

But Christians believe this about themselves. We're realistic.

This is what makes Christmas celebration so wonderful.

Jesus Christ came to deal with the warfare, bring peace between me and God.

Because of that I can love God, and know that he is truly for me.

Even when he says no. Even when my life is terribly disappointing.

The warfare is over. Do you know this peace the angels sang about?

That brings us to the second truth

MP#2 Peace with God is given to many, but not all.

Jesus came to make peace between God and people at war with Him.

But does this peace with God come to every single individual?

Listen to the angels' song:

On earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.

Peace with God through Jesus Christ only comes to those people on whom God's favor rests.

The undeniable implication is that there are men on whom his favor does not rest.

That is very divisive. It's very exclusive.

It divides the world into those who have God's favor and those who don't, those who receive this favor from God and those who do not.

The rest of Jesus' life and ministry confirms this.

It is not just in the Christmas story that this division is clear at every point in Jesus' life and ministry you see this division.

Jesus said:

I am the way, the truth, and the life—no one comes to the Father but by me.

There is the division. All ways don't lead to God. All truths are not relative.

He spoke of this division very bluntly to the Pharisees.

You do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice;

I know them, and they follow me.

Some are my sheep, others are not my sheep.

Jesus also said:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

There is the division again. People are separated. Sheep and goats.

Another example. Christ said:

Wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.

But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

Any way you look at it, the message of Christ is divisive.

God's favor rests on some but not on others.

Some people are then at peace with God, others are continually at war with him.

From the very beginning of Jesus life we see this.

God's favor rested on the shepherds—but not on King Herod.

They both heard that the Messiah was born, but for one it was a message of life, for the other it was a threat of destruction.

God's favor rested on the tax collectors and the prostitutes who believed Jesus, and who received forgiveness and peace with God.

But the Pharisees and religious leaders did not receive that favor.

Christ healed ten lepers. But nine of those when their way estranged from God.

Only one man returned and had his sins forgiven.

Peter was forgiven his betrayal, reconciled to Christ, and restored to usefulness.

Judas committed suicide and died estranged from God.

It is amazing selfish people like you and me can be forgiven and reconciled to God.

We can know him as our heavenly Father, know that he takes care of us in this life.

Know he has wonderful things planned for us in the life to come.

We become heirs to his great promises. Life forever in a restored creation, where we become the people God intended us to be.

And that all of this is a gift of God, given to us freely through Jesus Christ.

But it is also true that

even though the feast has been spread and the invitation extended—

there are many people who would rather starve than come.

For many the message of salvation through Jesus Christ

makes them bored or angry.

There are those who know God's grace and favor, and those who do not.

There are those who confess Jesus as Lord and those who do not.

So how can you know you are in the number of the favored?

If you want peace with God, how do you find it?

How can you be sure that you are one on whom God's favor rests?

That brings us to the third truth.

MP#3 There is only one certain way to have peace with God.

It's this: You have to respond to the song of the angels like the shepherds did.

You have to do what the shepherds did. They believed God.

They said: Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened.

They hurried to Bethlehem.

They believed that the message of Christ and his salvation was too wonderful and too important for anything else to take its place.

Who took care of the sheep when the shepherds left for town?

I guarantee one of them didn't volunteer to stay behind.

If somebody suggested that, the others would have said:

Great! But not me. I'm going to Bethlehem. The sheep can fend for themselves.

Unlike the wise men, they brought no gifts. They were poor men.

But that did not keep them away. They came with empty hands to see Christ.

And one more thing: They returned glorifying and praising God for the great thing he had done for them and for the world.

Yes, they saw angels. That was a unique experience that few people have had.

But for the rest of their lives, their hopes and happiness was in Christ.

Do you want to know whether God's favor rests on you?

Here's how you know.

Ask yourself this: Do I see myself among the shepherds?

Can I see myself doing what they did? Believing the message, acting on it.

Putting my faith and hope in Jesus Christ alone.

This is divisive. In fact, this might be the most divisive message of Christmas.

Because it takes salvation completely out of our hands.

Faith means that we come to God with nothing but our need

and open hands eager to receive everything Jesus has done for us.

That is a divisive message.

Because deep down every heart resists the idea that we bring nothing to God.

And that salvation rests entirely on what Jesus has done.

This is what sets Christianity apart from all the religions of the world.

All religions present a certain program:

This is what you are to do.

These are the duties you are to perform. Do these and you will achieve salvation.

That appeals to our self-righteous nature. It's something for us to do.
The message of Christmas is that God has done it all.

We simply come to the manger in faith and worship our Savior.

Our natural instinct is to try to save ourselves.

We try to put together some goodness to give to God so that he will accept us.
Some people think they are doing a good job at this.

Proudly and confidently say—look at my life. I'm a good, generous person.
I take care of my family. I'm a good neighbor. I go to church.
Of course God accepts me. Why should he not.

Other people are full of self-condemnation.

I've failed. Look at all the things I've not done that I should have done.
Look at my failures as a parent. Look at all the ways I haven't lived up.
But their faith is still in their own efforts.

If I only try harder. If I can only punish myself enough—atone for failures.
If only I can do better, then God will accept me.

Do you see that both of these people are identical spiritually?

They trust in what they do. Only difference is some think they are doing it.
Others think can if try harder.

Neither one is willing to say—Jesus Christ has done it all.

It is our inherent self-righteousness that causes us to resist faith in Christ.

Angels sang Glory to God in the highest because the message of Christmas
is that perfect goodness has been achieved by the Son of God born as a man.
By faith in Christ, his goodness, his life, his death is credited to you—
and through him you are made right with God.

That's why Christmas is so divisive.

That's why there will always be people who oppose Christmas or
try to make its message bland and harmless.

There is nothing you can do to earn your salvation—
Jesus Christ is the Savior—trust him alone.

CONC: The Christmas story in Luke 2 is a beautiful story.

No story that has captured the imagination of artists and song writers like this. The young couple—poor but rich in faith and love on the road during the last stages of her pregnancy. Unknown people in a huge crowd. And yet this virgin mother is carrying in her the King of Kings.

There was no room in the inn—so in the most humble conditions—the child was born. Announcement is first made—not to the rulers of age, but to the shepherds in a pasture outside Bethlehem.

It's a great story. One of the greatest of all stories—beautifully told.

Even in our secular society, many people captured by story.

But it is not the beauty and charm of this story that matters most—

what matters is that this really happened. This is real history.

This is the greatest thing that ever happened.

God the Son came into the world as a human being to live and die in our place.

The story of Jesus birth is not just a charming tale that gives people

a good feeling and warm sentiments—

It shows us the only way to peace with God and eternal life.

It is a message of judgment to those who refuse to believe in Christ—

and a message of salvation to those who do.

We want everyone to take Christmas seriously—

and if that means that it bothers some people so bad that they

don't even want to hear it mentioned in public—so be it.

They are, in a way they do not realize, paying Christmas the respect it deserves.

But we would much rather have people believe this story—

and put faith in Jesus Christ and be saved and live forever.

That is what will make you joyful today—

Cause you to sing in your heart as angels did—Glory to God in Highest.

Go home. Eat and drink with faith in Jesus Christ—

knowing that in him, and him alone—you have peace with God.