

Rediscover Christmas 2: Finding Peace in Our Struggles
Pastor Joe Oakley – GFC – 12/4/22

The Christmas Truce of 1914 has been called most remarkable incidents of World War I and perhaps of all military history. It was 1914 in Northern France. On the Western Front the British and German soldiers were hunkered down in trenches only 50 yards apart. Between them lay No Man's Land, bordered on both sides by barbed wire—they were close enough to hear each other's voices.

On Christmas Eve morning there was little rifle fire from either side. As darkness fell on Christmas Eve, the shooting stopped entirely for the first time in months! As night fell, the British soldiers saw clusters of tiny lights shining all along the German line as far as the eye could see. They got binoculars and saw that the Germans had placed Christmas trees in front of their trenches, lit by candles or lanterns like beacons of good will.

And then the Germans' voices could be heard singing the German version of "Silent night, holy night." When the song finished, the British applauded. Then they started singing The First Noel. The Germans responded with enthusiastic applause of their own and then began another song - O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum... Then the Brits replied - O come all ye faithful... But this time the Germans joined in, British and German soldiers harmonizing across No Man's Land!

It was thought nothing could be more amazing—but what came next was more so. The Germans asked for an officer to come out and talk to their officer. So he climbed out and went to meet the Germans halfway. A few minutes later, the captain came back and said "We've agreed to a truce. There will be no shooting during Christmas."

Across the way, groups of German soldiers came out of trenches unarmed. Then some Brits climbed out too, and soon, there were over 100 soldiers in No Man's Land - shaking hands with men they'd been trying to kill just hours earlier! They exchanged gifts and played soccer.

The Christmas truce eventually covered as much as two-thirds of the British-German front. Thousands of soldiers took part. What caused this peace? Christmas, when the Prince of Peace was born.

We are in a series called Rediscover Christmas and we are celebrating Advent – which means "coming" or "arrival." Advent is a season when we celebrate the arrival of Jesus Christ. And the arrival of Jesus changed everything!

Each week, we're focusing on a different result of the coming of Jesus: hope, peace, joy, and love. Last week Pastor Anthony preached a great message on Finding Hope in our Uncertainties.

Today I'm preaching on Finding Peace in our Struggles.

When it comes to peace, we must take a look at the shepherds – who were the unlikely recipients of God's message of peace. Let's read Luke's account about them in Luke 2:8-20.

And 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 the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen Him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Wow! There's so much in these few paragraphs. What a way to announce a long-awaited event that happened in such an unexpected way. Suddenly in the middle of a dark and ordinary night in the Bethlehem countryside, the sky is full of angels declaring glory to God in heaven and peace to people on earth.

Of course, the audience for this grand announcement and amazing angelic show must have been the most important VIPs, the rich and famous and powerful, the kings and queens and movers and shakers of the world, right? No! It was shepherds. Those completely ordinary, average, night shift-working animal keepers who were the unlikely recipients of this message of peace and favor.

It's yet another scene in how God is perfectly flipping the script on what we humans would do if it were up to us to save the world. And the whole experience leaves us asking, "Why shepherds?" Maybe it's because the shepherds actually tie many biblical threads together.

First, the shepherds remind us that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David were all shepherds. In the world's eyes, shepherds were nothing special. But they fit right into God's process of introducing the Messiah: a humble carpenter and a peasant

girl as parents for the Son of God, a birth in a lowly stable surrounded by animals and shepherds. Those considered by society to be the “most holy” weren’t given a place in the stable to witness the arrival of the Messiah.

Shepherds also remind us that sheep were very special animals in Jewish culture. The Passover lamb was the sacrifice an ancient Jew would make during the most important holiday. Its blood was the atonement for a person’s sins, the cost that had to be paid to restore a person with God. And each time it was done, this sacrifice was a reminder of the original Passover and God’s rescue and exodus of His people from Egypt.

These shepherds also signify Jesus’s future ministry and teaching. Jesus was entering our world to fulfill His identity as the Lamb of God who came to take away the sin of the world. He was the ultimate sacrifice and payment for our sins. His death did away with the need for these sacrificial lambs. His resurrection made it possible for us to be fully restored in our relationship with God. His life made it possible to experience true peace even in struggles.

It’s probably partly for all of these reasons that God sent His angelic messengers to announce the birth of His Son to shepherds. It certainly reminds us that God’s favor is not based on human standards.

And peace is not based on class or position or occupation but on God’s purpose to bring good news that will cause joy and peace for all people. I’m speaking on Finding Peace in our Struggles and that title is very important!

Our world seeks peace in so many different ways. We seek peace among nations, peace in our cities, peace in our families, peace in our churches, and peace in our own minds and hearts.

In the world, peace means an absence of war– conflict – disagreement. But, the Bible talks about a different kind of peace – a peace that is more than an absence of conflict. 2 Thessalonians 3:16 says:

Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.

This verse is not talking about the absence of conflict or struggle or war. I looked at 3 historical studies on the history of peace on our planet. They all agree on the basic statistics: During the last 4,000 years of recorded history, there have been only 268 years of peace in spite of good peace treaties. That means that since the beginning of recorded history, the entire world has been at peace less than 8 percent of the time!

If you look at history, there has not been much peace on our planet. But in the midst of all this war, God wants to give us peace at all times in every way.

This means that peace cannot be defined as the absence of conflict or problems.
 Peace is having inner calm in spite of outer turmoil.
 Peace is having inner tranquility despite other's hostility.
 Peace is being at rest in spite of the mess.
 God wants us to experience peace no matter what is going on around us.
 This peace was promised by Jesus who said in John 14:27:

Peace I leave with you; My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

Peace that Jesus gives is not the absence of trouble, but is rather the confidence that He is there with you always. But, we have to pursue peace and resist fear and a troubled heart.

So – how do we rediscover this peace even in times of struggle?
 Can we really have peace when the world's at war?
 Can we find peace when our family is struggling?
 Can we find peace even in the Christmas season when we're so busy?

YES! God's word says we can find peace at all times. He is there to give peace that calms hearts and defies circumstances! But you might say, "Pastor Joe, you don't know the fear and anxiety I am facing right now." No I don't, but God does.
 And He said in Isaiah 26:3

You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You.

Two keys to peace are faith and keeping our mind stayed on the Lord. We see this also in Romans 15:13

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

God fills us with joy, peace and hope when we focus our thoughts on Him and when we trust Him. So, when we lose our peace, our love or hope – that shows us that we are not trusting in God.

God wants us to trust Him with every aspect of our lives. This can only happen when we have an accurate perception of who God is and keep our mind stayed on those facts – that He is good and works all things out for our good. When we know God works all things for good then we can praise Him in all things and have His peace in all things! Peace only comes when we can trust God in all things.

Here's some other keys to peace from Paul in Philippians 4:4-7.

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be

evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

I want to encourage you today that no matter what you are facing, peace begins when you – in every situation – refuse to be anxious about anything – when you begin to rejoice in the Lord, remember He is near, pray, and give thanks – THEN God will give you His peace that goes beyond all human understanding!

By the way – to receive peace that passes understanding, you must give up your right to understand! There are some things you will never understand! And demanding understanding will not result in peace!

You will have no peace if you live by your own understanding.
Your own understanding will not get you through job loss or financial difficulties. You need something more.
Your own understanding will not get you through family problems or a spouse leaving you. You need something more.
Your own understanding will not get you through medical problems or the loss of a loved one. You need something more.

That something more is the peace of God that passes understanding. The Bible says we receive that peace when we pray and praise instead of being worried and afraid. Peace comes when we die to our need to understand everything and instead choose to trust God in everything!

I see 5 keys to peace here in Philippians – I'm going to use the acrostic peace to emphasize these points.

P Prayer (v.6)

Paul says to pray about everything – not some things, all things.
Prayer should be our first resort, not our last resort.

It doesn't matter so much how, when or where you pray, just that you pray. We can argue over form and posture and everything else, when really God's concern is just that we pray.

I heard about 3 men who were arguing about the proper posture for prayer. The first said that one should be on one's knees with head bowed and eyes closed in reverence to the Almighty. The second argued that one should stand with head raised looking into the heavens, eyes open and speak into the face of God as a little child. The third spoke up and said "Well, I don't know nothing about these positions, but I do know this: the finest praying I've ever done was hanging upside down after I fell into a well!"

God is not concerned about the outward appearance. He looks upon the heart. He's looking for childlike simplicity and trust. Peace is a result of prayer.

E Exultation – Rejoice (v.4) Rejoice at all times – in all things.

Exultation means to rejoice greatly – literally – to jump for joy. Rejoice in the Lord. Worship Him because He is worthy of praise no matter what you are going through. We tend to rejoice in good times and grumble in tough times. But the Bible teaches us to rejoice in all things.

There is a great lesson to be learned from the dictionary. When things start going bad, we often fear they will only get worse. Then we worry that the "worse" will take us to the "worst." To prevent the "worse" from turning in to the "worst," look at the unique setup God has provided in the English language. Any dictionary will separate the word "worse" and the word "worst" with one special word: "worship." When circumstances seem to be slipping in the wrong direction, remember that worship is the buffer between "worse" and "worst." So, we are to pray about all things and exult in all things.

A Anxious for nothing – (v.6-9) - Be anxious at no time for nothing!

I know this is easier said than done. In fact, this is only possible when we believe God is in control and works all things for our good. In Matthew 6:25-26 Jesus said:

Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?

Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?

Worry is evidence of lack of trust in God. No trust = no peace. The antidote is not to not care - the antidote is to cast those cares on God. 1 Peter 5:7 says:

Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you.

Throw it on Him! He cares, He will handle it. It's not that you will be passive and do nothing – but the care of it is cast on Him.

C Contentment (v. 11-13) - Be content in everything – all things.

We get this from Philippians 4:11-13

I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Him who gives me strength.

And you can do this too, but only in the strength of the Lord! So many people have memorized that scripture and use it in the context of doing great things for God. That's okay – but the context of this verse is being content whatever the circumstances. That's the “all things” we can do through Christ.

E Express Thanks (v. 6)

The ability to thank God in all situations is a huge key to peace!
If you lose your praise, you lose your peace.
I know it's hard at times! That's why it's called a sacrifice of praise!

Peace and praise go together!
And that peace will guard our hearts and our minds!
Peace is like a band of soldiers standing watch to protect you.
Peace keeps out worry, fear, and anxiety.

Jesus wants you to experience peace in your life. But peace in life starts with having peace with God. And peace with God only comes through Jesus Christ. Romans 5:1 says:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Some of you are in storms that seem like they'll never end and I'm here to tell you there is no peace without the Prince of Peace. You've tried everything to try to find inner peace and rest, but nothing seems to help.
You've searched for peace in a bottle – and only found addiction.
You've searched for peace in your business – and only found busyness.
You've searched for peace in people – and only found rejection.
So you've searched for peace in isolation – and only found loneliness.
You've been searching for something to bring rest to the turmoil of your life – But I assure you, there is no peace without the Prince of Peace.

Give peace a chance means to give Jesus a chance.
I urge you to accept God's gift of peace by accepting Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. You can leave here today in peace.

I encourage you to look for the Prince of Peace, even when the winds blow and the storms swirl.

Let me encourage us all to come to Him and worship like the shepherds!
We come to Him because He is here and because He cares.
The Prince of Peace is with us and He came to earth to be our peace!
Numbers 6:24-26 says:

The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn His face toward you and give you peace.