



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
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CHRISTMAS EVE

December 24, 2014

“And on Earth Peace”

(Luke 2:13)

Rev. David K. Groth

“‘And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace.’” (Lk. 2:13).

Collect of the Day

O God, You make us glad with the yearly remembrance of the birth of Your only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Grant that as we joyfully receive Him as our Redeemer, we may with sure confidence behold Him when He comes to be our Judge; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

One hundred years ago tonight, Christmas Eve, 1914, two great armies were facing each other. Much of the front was below sea level, so troops were slogging around in muddy trenches. Just 50 to 100 yards away was the enemy trench. In between was No-Man's-Land, littered with the dead. Each side posted snipers to shoot anything that moved. The only time they got out of the trenches was when the order to charge was given. Then, thousands would climb up and out and run forward into a hail of bullets.

As the first Christmas approached, troops on both sides received packages from home to boost morale.

In the late afternoon hours, [about this time one hundred years ago], the shooting slowed down . . . and then came to a halt. No one issued an order; soldiers on both sides simply stopped shooting.

A German voice called out into the silent dark. "A gift is coming now!" Expecting a grenade, the British dove for cover. What was lobbed over was a boot filled with sausages and chocolate. The British scurried to gather some of their own tobacco and chocolate and lobbed it over in reply.

Then the singing started: at first, patriotic songs, military songs. One side, followed by applause from the opposite trench, then the other. Then the Germans began singing again, this time, a Christmas carol. "Silent Night." "*Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht.*" Up and down the front it spread in German *and* English simultaneously. More singing. More carols. In one place, a beautiful tenor voice mesmerized both sides with "O Holy Night." Before the war

he sang for the Paris Opera.

Bright and early on Christmas Day, signboards rose up and down the trenches in a variety of shapes. “You no shoot. We no shoot,” and “Sing Today”. Then, remarkably, a few brave soldiers emerged up out of the trenches—unarmed, hands high above their heads, and walked slowly, tentatively, ever so cautiously into no-man’s-land and met in the middle. They shook hands awkwardly. Contagion set in. Up and down the lines the trenches emptied.

It was soon decided the dead in No Man’s Land needed to be buried. And so they did, armies of men retrieved their trench shovels to dig graves together. In one area, the British provided wooden crosses for all the dead, including the German dead. Then here and there, there were impromptu services of burial for the dead. The Germans lined up on one side, the British on the other, every head bared and bowed for the Lord’s Prayer and Psalm 23, “The Lord is my Shepherd. Der Herr ist mein Hirte.”

Gifts were exchanged from their government Christmas packages, and then belt buckles and the like. In several places, makeshift soccer balls were fashioned and games erupted. In one area, they used stretchers to mark the goal posts, in another the spiked German helmets served that purpose. One soldier wrote to his parents, “It was just terrific to be no longer an army of moles, but up and running on *top* of the ground.” (p. 120). Another wrote, “Here we were laughing and chatting to men whom only a few hours before we were trying to kill” (p. 80).

It happened 100 years ago tonight, a spontaneous gesture of peace and good will between men. (See “*The Christmas Truce*” by Dr. Stanly Weintraub.) But, tragically, man’s peace doesn’t last. It doesn’t endure. Headquarters on both sides ordered men back to their trenches and gave the order to renew hostilities. Within days the war resumed in earnest: six thousand deaths per day for the next forty-six months . . . a war of attrition not to determine who was right, but who was left.

Man’s peace doesn’t last. It doesn’t endure. We talk

fondly of peace, but the makings for it just don't seem to be in our DNA. Walk into a video game store and look at the covers and titles and you'll see what's in our DNA. Titles like "Assassin's Creed" and "Dark Souls II" and "Diablo III: Reaper of Souls" and "Grand Theft Auto". These games are as violent and sinister as man's imagination can make them, and ever more graphic. They make the actions of ISIS in Iraq and Boko Haram in Nigeria look like child's play, and they are under Watertown Christmas trees tonight . . . for the children to play during Christmas break.

We talk a lot about peace, but there is not much peace, actually. Not in Syria, or Pakistan, not in New York or Milwaukee, not in Watertown or even our own hearts.

When we think of peace, we think of the absence of conflict. But there's got to be more to peace than a temporary cease fire.

To hold one's peace means to be quiet. To make peace means to surrender or submit or compromise. But I think the days before World War II taught us the policy of appeasement does not generate true peace "in our time."

To rest in peace means to die, but *that's* not what the angels had in mind.

Announcing the birth of Jesus, the angels said, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace." It's a different kind of peace altogether, not one generated by man, but one given to men by God. That's what we're celebrating tonight, the birth of the Prince of Peace who made peace between God and man.

It is God's gift to us, one that is real and true whether we feel it in our hearts or not. It is a great blessing. After all, what kind of life can it be if you think your creator and your ultimate judge is looking down on you, frowning, scowling, biding his time until he finally gets to vent his justice? What kind of life can it be if you think of God as the enemy? But God has made peace with us. He is not the enemy. Jesus has shown us who God is. Jesus is a window into God.

Suppose you are in a room which is completely dark,

windowless. Then, from the outside, someone knocks a hole in the wall and makes a window. Light comes in and illuminates the room. Now we can see the outside world through the window—a world which was always there but which we couldn't really see before. Jesus is a window into God. He is the light of God who has come into the world to illuminate it, and who lets us see God. Perhaps the window is not as large as we would like. Perhaps the glass is less clear than we would like (“now we see through a glass dimly”, 1 Cor. 13:12), but God is suddenly made available for us through Jesus. Hebrews 1 says, “In many and various ways God spoke to his prophets of old, but now he has spoken to us by his Son” (v. 1). Because of Jesus, we know where God stands.

- When we see Jesus lying in a manger we know he's humble, approachable. He's not aiming to clobber us.
- When we see Jesus eating with sinners and tax collectors, we know there must be room at God's table for us.
- When we see Jesus welcoming the little children into his arms, we know he loves our children too.
- When we see Jesus healing the sick, we know that when we're sick, God cares for us. Not once do we see Jesus ever inflicting someone with a disease.
- When we see Jesus expelling the demons, we know God is diametrically opposed to our enemy the devil, and will curb the devilish acts of men and women in our day.
- When we see Jesus calming the storm on the Sea of Galilee and telling his disciples to fear not, we know God doesn't want us to fear the storms of life because he'll be there in the boat with us and will see us through.
- When we see Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, we know God wants to raise us to life too, because he loves us every bit as much as Lazarus. Not once did Jesus inflict death on anyone, even those who were inflicting death on him.

And when we see Jesus on a cross, we know God will go to any length to save us. He achieved peace *for* us by bearing

the punishment of our sins. We don't make our peace with God. (I very much dislike that expression because it robs God of the glory due him.) Long ago He made peace with us.

The peace that men make with one another . . . it never lasts very long. It's still a goal worthy to strive for, even in places like the Middle East, and Ferguson, and in your own family room. Making peace with one another is always a worthy goal. But the kind of peace we make with one another is imperfect and often short-lived. Soon we find ourselves back in the muddy trenches . . . ready, sometimes even eager to renew hostilities.

But thanks be to God, the Prince of Peace. He has worked a true and lasting peace between God and man. Nothing can undo it. Nothing and no one can shatter *that* peace. Thanks be to God! Amen.

