

Luke 2:8-14  
It Came Upon the Midnight Clear  
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12-9-18

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**And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. <sup>10</sup> And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. <sup>11</sup> For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. <sup>12</sup> And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” <sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup> “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”**

Imagine if you will the rocky, windswept hills of first century Palestine. Plotting his way over and down the undulating terrain a shepherd. His name is Rahim. Rahim is one in a long line of subsistence farmers and sheep herders who have stalked these same hills for generations, scratching a living—though not more. His name, Rahim, is not just an abbreviation of his people’s hero, the Patriarch, Abraham, but for him it’s a haunting reminder, a promise too distant to believe, a dream cut short, a people with a truncated sense of identity. Of course, he remembers the story, the God who set a people apart, calling them his own. But life was hard on his people—unrelenting even. And this land and its people had been conquered and reconquered, paved over by civilization after civilization, until even an identity of his own was almost an after-thought. It was just Rahim.

But on cold and cloudless nights, like this one, if the wind is just right, you can almost make out the faint echo, voices from the past. The voice of another shepherd, only this one knew intimacy with a Shepherd God who tended to the sheep of his pasture. You can almost make out the shape of a rock and a cleft and a Shepherd King hiding from the pursuits of those who would snuff out the promise. But that vision and those words are of little consequence to us now, and besides we are shepherds that’s what we know, what more could we hope for? At the very least we know that Caesar and Herod are in charge, which for now means life can plot along mostly uninterrupted.

Looking up into the cloudless distant sky he and his two brothers know it’s time to settle in for the night, Rahim pulls out his bedding, which like most everything he has smells distinctively of the wooly beasts they tend day after day. He and his brothers encircle their little flock, protecting them with their own bodies, while absorbing all the heat they can from their charge.

Off in the distance by the vestiges of twilight and the few remaining lights inside, he recognizes the presence of the temple. Oh the temple, he sighs. And with the last remaining thoughts traversing the landscape, between consciousness and dreams, he wonders: is there something more? A dream, perhaps, bold enough even for me?

Without warning a burst of light more radiant and incandescent than the noonday sun, and standing before them was a man, an angel, like a warrior of light.

**“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.”**

This was not the first-time people living under the banner of the Roman Empire had gotten word that there was Good News or Gospel (Euangelion) happening. They had heard it before at the birth of Cesar Augustus. The poets and the historians of the palace court heralded that at long last a savior had been born to Rome, and it was the beginning of good news, Caesar.

In fact, chiseled in the foundation of a government building finished just prior to Caesar's birth were these words: "The most divine Caesar . . . we should consider equal to the Beginning of all things, Caesar . . . the common good Fortune of all...who being sent to us and our descendants as Savior, has put an end to war and has set all things in order; and (whereas,) having become (god) manifest, Caesar has fulfilled all the hopes of earlier times . . . the birthday of the god (Augustus) has been for the whole world the beginning of good news /EVANGELION/ concerning him."

And yet, like so many other announcement of good news, peace and prosperity came from the halls of palaces where emperors live. Where men and women of privilege, who had consolidated power for the good of the empire, pronounced decrees that would travel over all the lands. But Rome is a far, far cry from the sparse and dusty fields of Judah, someplace nobody was paying attention to.

The only thought ever given to Bethlehem was just keeping the peace, status quo. Sure the Pax Romana (the peace of Rome) might trickle-down, but only after layer upon layer of government bureaucracy and instilling the fear of Caesar in the hearts of the Jews.

Caesar was a legend, almost a myth, someone who—if we ever did have occasion for money in our pockets—was just a face on a coin. Nothing more than that. But we recall something once said of good news for all people, could old Isaiah be right, that one would bring good news to people like us, poor, downhearted, captive, bound up? (Isaiah 61:1)

Then this angel said something that was almost unrecognizable to our ears: **For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.**

In the Greek language, in which these verses were originally written the personal pronoun "you" is in the plural and is in the dative case. In English we don't have a dative case, what the dative indicates something that comes directly to you. It's aimed directly at the person who is reading or hearing it. We would use the dative when I give a gift to you, or pull you aside to say I have a question for you.

The angel tells these lowly shepherds that a Savior had been born, and not just in general. He's born to you! Or in other words he's born for you! This birth has specific purpose and meaning not only for you, but for untold numbers of others.

Is there something of your life that feels tedious or monotonous, like these shepherds dutifully tending their sheep day after day? To you is born this day a savior. Is there a well-worn rut you find yourself in, and the more you walk it, the more difficult it is to change course? To you is born this day a savior. Has the vastness of the dominant culture that surrounds you, and the foreign values given you an ever shrinking sense your own identity in the world? To you is born this day a savior. Does Christmas feel repetitive, consumeristic, or worse, void of any real impact? To you is born this day a savior

These words from the angels “for you,” they’re for you too. Not only did it happen back then, but the Advent of the Messiah Jesus continues to happen the realization comes to someone who realizes that **to you is born this day a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.**

**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 among those with whom he is pleased!”**

In 1849, as he was preparing for his Christmas Eve Service, Edward Hamilton Sears looked out over a nation of mounting tensions between the north and south, and his community in Massachusetts that was mired in poverty. He wondered what the Christmas message had to say this time. And as he sat in his study, desperately looking for the words to share, what came to him was not a sermon, but a song:

It Came Upon The Midnight Clear, that glorious song of old.  
From angels bending near the earth, to touch their harps of gold:  
Peace on the earth goodwill to men, from heaven’s all gracious King.  
The world in solemn stillness lay, to hear the angels sing.

As this carol starts out we see the world like a sort of Norman Rockwell or Charles Dickens Christmas Card. A world that is just peacefully turning, people and places sleepily going about their years. And everything always just sort of turns out right. Quaint, right?

But in the second verse the world begins to be disrupted. The seams begin to stretch and strain. And if you look at most of the hymnals where this hymn, appears you’ll find it has 4 verses. But when Sears penned it, he included 5 verses, and it’s the middle verse which often gets omitted.

Looks at the words...

Yet with the woes of sin and strife the world has suffered long;  
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled two thousand years of wrong;  
And man, at war with man, hears not the love-song which they bring;  
O hush the noise, ye men of strife, and hear the angels sing.

You go from this first verse, which brings such peaceful memories to mind, into the second and third verse that speak of a world wrapped in conflict and burdened by the effects of human wrong. Remember, this hymn was written about 10 years before the Civil War broke out. 10 years before our nation would be plunged into the deepest and most destructive period in our history. And what Edward Sears wrote about for his Christmas message that year was the angels coming to people, plotting along with their lives as the world around them felt like it was ready to explode.

So what kind of peace is it that Christmas brings to us? Is it the sentimental message of peace that we see on the greeting cards? Well for Sears, when he wrote this, the peace he longed for was a political peace, an end to violence and strife. And certainly this kind of peace is important and worth pursuing.

But if this is the only kind of peace that Jesus came to bring, somebody at some point is going to say: you've had 2,000 years to figure this out, how's it working for you? 10 years after he wrote this, our nation would face its bloodiest time. The last century has arguably been the most violent since Jesus walked the earth. Now this doesn't mean that Jesus' message isn't about making peace between nations. Jesus in the beatitudes in Matthew said Blessed are the peacemakers. But the peace announced by this angel and the heavenly host is not primarily a political or relational peace between people.

How about the inward peace, the peace like a river? The hymn talks about this too, it says: And you, beneath life's crushing load, whose forms are bending low. And I know there are those of us who know the pressure of life pressing down on us. But again, this message of peace is not primarily or uniquely about a sort of inward peace. Although life with Jesus does lead to this, with that peace that passes all understanding.

So what is the peace that Jesus came to bring, if not primarily among us, or within us? I think that it's a peace between God and us.

Many of you grew up with the King James version which read: and on earth peace, goodwill toward men. Right? But scholars almost universally agree that the more accurate translation of this verse is: **and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased, (or on whom his favor rests).**

You see the peace that God wants to offer is the restoring of a right relationship between us and God. Once chapter earlier, when old Zechariah is finally freed from his tongue-tied this is what he speaks over his son John the Baptist, and this is what he says:

**“You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us<sup>[1]</sup> from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” Luke 1:76-79**

In the opening verse of that beloved hymn Hark the Herald Angels Sing it says what? Peace on earth and mercy mind...why? God and sinners reconciled.

So how do we receive this peace? First I think it begins by admitting that we're at war with God. And I know this sounds harsh, often we tend not to think of ourselves as sinful, but rather something like morally sub-optimal.

Tim Keller writes that the natural condition of our heart is not ignorance toward God, so that what we need is more information. It's not indifference, where what we need is more motivation to find God. No, the primary condition of our heart is hostility, so that what we need is reconciliation with God. It is only when we come to terms with this when we come before a perfect and holy God that we can receive the gift of peace that Jesus wants to offer.

Let's go back to the fields, to the shepherds here as we close. Standing speechless before these heavenly beings who are announcing that a child is the herald of peace, somehow it feels so small a thing to imagine that such an event would take place just so that me and my brothers or families and

communities would return to one another. It also feels somehow too distant useless to imagine that Rome's peace would somehow reach down to us. Hasn't it, after all, been a revolving door of control over our people for a millennia? That political tranquility somehow doesn't feel right either. Maybe those long-forgotten promises, echoes from a time no one believed would return, are beginning to resound again, gathering in strength, mounting up in the hearts of our people.

Maybe, just maybe this message of the savior born just over that eastern hill, in Bethlehem, is just so absurd that it could actually be true. In any case, what else have we to do that's more important than to go and see. Go and see, go and see, that seems right, that seems right.