

Lectionary Scriptures  
in message / liturgy:

Luke 3: 1-6

2,485 words

Additional Scripture  
references:

Isaiah 26:3  
Isaiah 11:9  
Matthew 5:3 – 9  
Luke 2:13 – 14  
Romans 8:38 – 39

Key songs:

VU 20 On Jordan's Bank  
VU 18 There's a Voice in the Wilderness  
VU 9 People, Look East  
VU 28 Herald! Sound the Note of Gladness  
VU 29 Hark, the Glad Sound

Additional music:

Creation Will Be At Peace (Williams & Page)  
Let There Be Peace on Earth

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## **Peace on Earth**

At this time of year, we hear the phrase "Peace on Earth" a lot.

It's on Christmas cards.

It's in Christmas Carols.

It's everywhere.

What does it mean?

And is it really going to happen?

The phrase comes from the second chapter of Luke, where we read in verses 13 and 14:

*13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,*

*14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests."*

We lit the "Candle of Peace" this morning.

I think it's safe to say that people might have a range of very different ideas if I pose the question "what does peace on earth mean to you?"

Most people consider one of two different things in relation to the word peace, and these line up with the two principal definitions in the Oxford Dictionary:

1. freedom from disturbance; tranquility.
2. a state or period in which there is no war or a war has ended.

I think, for most of us, our immediate thought probably inclines toward the first definition.

Aren't we all looking for some peace and quiet?

If we read "Peace on Earth" in a Christmas card, what do we picture?

I think my first instinct is to picture a snow-covered Christmas scene, with new-fallen fresh snow, and maybe only a couple of sets of footprints trudging across it. There's probably a house or two (or maybe even a row of buildings in a village) and smoke rising from the chimneys. It is most certainly at night, and soft yellow light emanates from the windows.

It's a picture that exudes warmth and comfort, and above all, quiet.

The fresh snow absorbs a lot of sound, so that scene will be practically silent. It's probably the illustration of the words of the famous carol, "Silent Night."

Many of you know that I enjoy winter camping. A lot of people don't understand that, and would never, ever venture out and sleep in a tent or under a tarp amidst the snow in the forest.

But it's so quiet and peaceful. Like that snow-covered Christmas scene, it's beautifully quiet. The snow, largely untrodden, blankets the ground. You can hear the smallest sounds of nature. It's exactly, I think, what being at peace with your surroundings should look and feel like.

So that's what the "Peace on Earth" Christmas card conjures up for me. Maybe you'll get a card like that this season - if you do, stop and think about the image it presents to you.

That is, if you get any Christmas cards this year - with the postal strike, you may not. I guess we can add "labour peace" to our list of definitions, or at least our list of things we don't seem to have yet.

If we're thinking that way, we might conclude that peace means, for us, comfort and safety. We picture a life with no strife, and no want. We imagine warmth and safety. We imagine food security. We imagine everyone smiling and getting along.

And we all have times in our life that fit that scenario.

But is that all that peace means? If we have that kind of peace, are we all good?

Pastor Marvin McMickle recently retired as president of Colgate Rochester Crozier Divinity School in New York state. He writes *“What do you and I mean when we employ the word peace? ... Let me suggest several things about peace. First, peace comes only from God, and nothing else of this world can offer the peace promised by the angels. Second, peace cannot be experienced by a single person or by a certain group of persons if, at the same time, it is being denied or withheld from others. Peace is as much between us as it is within us. Finally, the peace I want to see in the world must first be made alive in my own life. I cannot wait for peace to break out somewhere else; peace must begin with me!”*

Pastor McMickle goes on to say *“Peace is the certain knowledge that everything we have been told about God is true and certain. I have peace in times of crisis because I know “the Lord will make a way somehow.” I have peace in the time of death because I know “when the earthly house we live in shall be destroyed, we have another building, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” I have peace in times of temptation because I know God who will “keep me from falling.”*

In the anthem this morning, we heard the words *“in the holy mountain of the LORD, all war and strife will cease - in the holy mountain of the LORD, creation will be at peace”* which is paraphrased from Isaiah 11:9.

In Isaiah 26:3 (NKJV) we read, in relation to what God will do, “You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on you.”

In other words, peace comes as we rely less and less on the things of this world and rely more and more on the promises of God.

In the times in which we live, right now, “peace talks” and “peace envoys” make the news regularly.

We hear cautious optimism at news of a possible ceasefire that may, or may not, be respected, and may, or may not, last. And if it lasts, it may, or may not, help in the long run.

However, the images that fill our television screens are, in a word, not pretty.

We see scenes of war and destruction.

We also see lines of refugees fleeing their homes with only what they can carry on their backs.

We see weeping, grieving people who have lost their parents, or their children.

And we read, in the history books, of the countless times that nations have gone to war, and the horrors that resulted.

We don't pay a lot of attention to this sort of news anymore, because we've seen it all before, and time and time again, the human race have proved that the majority of the time, people are in it for themselves, and in it for what they can get for themselves.

Not, obviously, a good way to work towards real, lasting peace, that requires people to give rather than take.

Going back to the verse from Isaiah - the prophet told us that “God will keep us in perfect peace if our mind is focused on God”

Admittedly, it's difficult to focus on God when you lack basic human necessities, or when someone is shooting at you.

And that's the biggest challenge with most of what we read in the Scriptures.

What we're asked to do is hard. Very hard.

Can any of you imagine yourself doing the work actually required to overcome the human greed, ignorance, pride, self-interest and hubris that allows conflict to flourish?

Now imagine yourself doing it with bombs raining down on your head.

John Ritenbaugh, an American pastor, wrote: *"Governments send their emissaries in attempts to avoid all-out war, but they never seem able to accomplish anything except short-lived, surface tranquility that only allows the parties to gear themselves up for the next round of hostilities. Some of these antagonisms have simmered and flared for centuries—one has its roots in discord existing for millennia! Based on human history, everyone can reasonably conclude that the business of peacemaking has generally been an abject failure, though interspersed with some moderate, brief successes in bringing the worst of the hostilities to a halt for a while."*

In Matthew 5:9 we read "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." That sums up the whole list of what are called the Beatitudes.

The whole list is worthy of a look:

3 Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

- 4 Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they will be comforted.
- 5 Blessed are the meek,  
for they will inherit the Earth.
- 6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
for they will be satisfied.
- 7 Blessed are the merciful,  
for they will be shown mercy.
- 8 Blessed are the pure in heart,  
for they will see God.
- 9 Blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they will be called the Sons of God.

Rev. Arthur Plummer, in Selbie's "Dictionary of the Bible" explains that "*each Beatitude consists of two phrases: the condition and the result. In almost all cases the phrases used are familiar from an Old Testament context, but in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus elevates them to new levels and teachings. Together, the Beatitudes present a new set of ideals that focus on love and humility rather than force and exaction. They echo the highest ideals of Jesus' teachings on spirituality and compassion.*"

So these are the ideals we are to live by. I don't think it's an accident that the Beatitudes teach that the result, or reward if you like, of being a peacemaker is to be called a child of God.

What does it mean to be a child of God? It means that you are a son or daughter of the Almighty, adopted through Jesus, and as we read in Romans 8:38- 39 "neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God"

That has to be the pinnacle – what we are striving for: the ultimate harmony manifested in being irrevocably connected to God.

That, I think, would look like peace to all of us.

*This ties back to what we read from Pastor Ritenbaugh, as he went on to say: “If we are indeed regenerated by God's Spirit, being at peace and making peace will be the rule in our lives. As to the actual mechanisms that we can use to make peace, room for some differences of opinion certainly exists. There can be no dispute, however, that the vocation of every Christian is to make peace primarily through what he himself is. Secondly, we must strive to secure the conditions and relationships that will make good will, concord and cooperation possible instead of hatred, strife, competition and conflict. “Peace” signifies any kind of good produced by the Gospel. It is the good news of reconciliation and the end of the conflicts, distresses and woes of our warfare. ”*

So in there is perhaps a hint.

Being at peace and making peace should be the rule in our lives, and we can make peace primarily through what we are.

Maybe we don't need to solve all the world's conflicts.

Which would be good – because solving those conflicts is a monumental task.

But, like all tasks, a certain unity of purpose is required from a large number of people, in order to help make things happen.

But those things only happen through faith in the one who created all people.

“God will keep us in perfect peace if our mind is focused on God”



Pastor McMickle has this to say about peace: *“That is what peace looks like: tranquility and calm in the midst of the storms of life that allow you to get on with your life and do what needs to be done. That kind of peace does not come from anything this world can provide. That kind of peace comes only from God and, more precisely, from our relationship with God.”*

The angels said:

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.”*

The promise of the angels was for “peace, on earth, to those on whom God’s favour rests.” That does not mean prosperity for us and terrible poverty everywhere else in the world. That does not mean that some people have access to medical care while millions cannot afford to see a doctor. Peace can never be fully enjoyed by some when it is being denied or withheld or made unavailable or unaffordable for so many others. Whatever the angels were announcing that day in Bethlehem, they wanted all of the people on the earth to fully share in its benefits.

Peace must begin with us. We must initiate the action and tell someone, “I am sorry.” We must go first and tell someone, “I forgive you.” We must lead the way, set the good example and start doing in our own lives those things we would hope to see others do some day.

It was Mahatma Gandhi who said, “We must be the change we hope to see in others.”

If there is going to be peace on earth, then we have to be willing to initiate the action that can bring about that peace. The world will not be substantively changed if all of us simply wait for somebody else to make the first move. Peace must begin with us.

Can we actually bring about peace by our own actions?

Not individually, of course, but together...

Together, we would be doing the work God has called us to do.

So, if our mind is focused on God, Isaiah has prophesied that God will keep us in perfect peace.

And if we all did that - the angels said that peace would be given to those on whom God's favour rests.

Gandhi said that we need to be the change we hope to see in others.

It's hard to imagine God's favour not resting on the peacemakers.

In our Scripture reading this morning, we heard the story of John, preaching repentance in the wilderness. *"Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him... And all people will see God's salvation."*

We are to make straight paths for the LORD.

We need to be in a right relationship with God, and we need to make straight paths for God here on earth.

The peace that comes through our relationship with God, and which continues through our peaceful, loving, caring, repentant relationship with each other, is the lasting peace we all seek.

Imagine if everybody did that.

Louis Armstrong sang: *"The colours of the rainbow, so pretty in the sky  
Are also on the faces of people going by  
I see friends shaking hands, saying, "How do you do?"  
They're really saying "I love you"  
....  
And I think to myself, what a wonderful world."*

Peace on earth is possible. But we must all do our part.

We all know this song, I think:

*"Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me."*

Let's listen again to that song.

As we listen, think about your part.

Peace on earth is possible.

And it starts right here, right now.

With all of us.

Focused on God, and working for right relationships with everyone.