

"Are You Listening?"

Text: Luke 2:8-14

May the birth of the Savior continually fill you with the same wonder and joy first experienced by the shepherds. Amen.

Children and men have one thing in common. Well, according to our wives we have lots of things in common, but we focus on one thing in particular this morning: children and men don't tend to listen very well. What makes it kind of funny (at least to men) is the fact that when moms and wives say things to us, it's not as if we don't hear because there are lots of other deep and meaningful thoughts going on up in our manly minds. Most of the time there's nothing going on up there at all – which is pretty much how we tend to like it. When moms and wives are talking, we would just rather go on thinking about nothing than have to expend the energy to form thoughts and concentrate.

Unless of course there's something in it for us.

Which almost makes you wonder if that's why the angels preceded the announcement recorded in our text for this morning as they did – with the brilliance of the glory of the Lord. Which also makes you wonder if, had the wives of the shepherds walked to that hillside and made the announcement, their men might well have greeted the news with a, "*That's nice honey*" and simply gone about their business. Pretty hard to ignore news that is immediately preceded by the blinding brilliance of the shining majesty of heaven.

You and I will not be privileged with such an introduction this morning, so it might just take a bit more effort to actually *hear* today's message from our God and, hearing, actually comprehend just what our God is saying to us. This task is made all the more difficult by the fact that the world completely misses the true meaning of these words – and continually draws us to their misunderstanding. The text that we will strive to actually *hear* this morning, and from which we will seek to learn and grow, is found in the Second Chapter of Luke's Gospel – words also made all the harder to really *hear* because they are so familiar to all of us:

^{ESV} **Luke 2:8-14** *And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the*

city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

So far the very words of God. We pray: *Remind us often, O Holy Spirit, that these are your words, fill us with the wonder and glory of these words, and hear us when we pray, "Sanctify us by Your Truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth!" Amen.*

Dear Fellow Messengers of true and eternal peace, it is certainly a popular word today, isn't it - "peace." Everyone is for peace, which makes it the perfect wish, the perfect present, and the perfect blessing. Peace. Yet when you actually take a moment or two to splash around in this puddle, the waters get muddied in a hurry. What is this "peace"? How do you get it and how do you give it? Are we talking about world peace (as in the cessation of all war), religious peace, internal peace, marital peace, peace of mind, what?

More to the point this morning, is that the sort of thing the angels had in mind when they announced the birth of the Son of God with the words, "**Peace on earth**"? Seems rather unlikely, but let's let Scripture speak for itself.

As is so often the case, we begin understanding a word or a concept by first understanding what it is not. Is the "**peace of God**" or the "**peace on earth**" all about cessation of wars? Jesus was no fan of war, but he himself told us that war did not come to an end with his arrival. In fact in Mark 13:7-8 he said, "**And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁸ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains.**" So much for the most common understanding of the term as the world uses it. The angels weren't announcing an end to all wars, since Jesus himself said that such things would continue.

If not *world* peace, does the Bible mean "general tolerance and acceptance of differing religious beliefs" when it speaks of peace? Jesus again answers for us: (**Matthew 10:34-38**) "**Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to set a man against his**

father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. ³⁶ **And a person's enemies will be those of his own household.** ³⁷ **Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.** ³⁸ **And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me."** Jesus obviously did not believe in acceptance of all religions as equal. In fact in John 14:6 Jesus said, **"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."** We would all have to agree that this is a pretty exclusive – and therefore divisive – statement. No one gets to heaven ("**comes to the Father**") except through faith in His Son Jesus. That's the sort of thing that causes strife, not harmony.

Well if the angels weren't talking about world peace or religious peace through toleration, were they perhaps talking about something as simple as "peace of mind" - the confidence that comes with knowing that you will be "healthy, wealthy and wise" in this life. Again Jesus' words: **(John 16:33) "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."** No, not that either. Christians should expect hard times.

So just what sort of peace were the angels talking about and what exactly did they promise on that Christmas Night?

First of all, the angels didn't *promise* anything. What they did is announce to the world three *facts* as decreed by their Creator God. The first announcement or fact was that glory was the possession of God in heaven. The second was that peace *has come* to earth. The third was that mankind now *has*, as our possession, God's good will.

We examine the first declaration: **"Glory to God in the highest."**

Every gift has a source, and that source is worthy of more than just a thank you. The source is also deserving of acknowledgement. On a very simple level, that means that when you open a gift at Christmas, not only is the person that gave you the gift worthy of a thank you, it is altogether right for the recipient to bring to mind all that the giver of the gift has done – investing thought, time, and money *for you* – and to honor the giver accordingly. In other words, the gift itself takes on greater value when you consider that the giver thought about you, considered your needs, and then spent the time and money to buy and wrap your present. If you have ever seen the shameful spectacle of a child bragging about what he got for Christmas, you probably have a sense of what it looks like to get this sort

of thing wrong. Where is the boasting in *receiving*? More to the point, where is the bragging when we receive something *from God*?

So also on that first (original) Christmas, the holy angels announced the glory of the Giver of the Gift. They draw, as it were, a great big arrow that points away from mankind and to God, the one true Provider. Note especially that they really don't *encourage* mankind to do something here; they make a triumphant announcement of the way things are: **"The glory is God's!"** They do not say, **"Mankind ought to give glory to God,"** but **"All of the glory connected with this great event belongs to God."**

Mankind often has a direction problem. These declarations by the angels seek not only to declare the birth of the Savior, but they do so by also addressing our direction problem. An example might help to illustrate what that means.

When you hear that the Virgin Mary was blessed, how do you pronounce that word "blessed" and what do you mean by it? The word can be pronounced "bles-sed" or "blest." The first means that Mary possesses some quality or attribute that makes her special, the second that Mary is the recipient of God's gracious gifts. While at least one denomination promotes the idea that Mary is bles-sed (and therefore to be venerated or adored as if she were herself something of a goddess), we believe and teach that Mary was just an ordinary, sinful human being who was blessed ("blest") by her God. She was the recipient. It is God alone who deserves the praise.

You see the direction problem. Man sees a gifted person and wants to praise and glorify the person. What we are supposed to do when we encounter a gift in another human being is to *praise the God who gave such gifts to men*. If you happen to be the recipient of such a gift, your goal ought to be to use what you have been given to glorify not self but the God who gave you that gift. So also here the angels directed our attention first to the God who gave the Gift, and in the next two announcements gave evidence why the glory belongs to him alone.

The first of the two announcement made by the angels was that peace has now come to earth. You will recall that the world has a bit of difficulty with the concept of "peace on earth." Let it not be so with us.

While every sane human being certainly longs for an end to all wars, mankind actually had a much bigger problem: we were at war with our God.

Make no mistake. God is the *last* person you and I want as our enemy. Jesus himself said in Matthew 10:28, "**And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.**" If God is our enemy, nothing else matters. On the other hand, if God is our friend, again, nothing else matters. When the angels announced "peace on earth," they declared that a state of peace now exists between God and man. It was the announcement that God has extended the hand of peace to mankind by sending the Savior. We had separated ourselves from our God by our wickedness. Since mankind's fall into sin, a state of war had existed between God and man. The payment for man's sin had not yet been completed. God deserves all of the glory in correcting that problem because he himself gave his greatest possession to fix the very problem that you and I had created. Paul basically paraphrased the announcement of the angels when he wrote to the Corinthians: "**Now all things are of God** (Glory to God in the highest!) **who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ** (peace on earth!) **and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.**" Paul then goes on to explain what sort of peace mankind has been given: "**In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.**" (2 Corinthians 5:18-19)

The peace that the angels announced is *objective*. That means that they are describing God's attitude toward man, not man's attitude toward God or man's attitude toward each other. In the place of wrath and enmity, there is now good will on the part of our holy God. In Christ Jesus, our God is also now our friend. Mankind now has, as our possession, God's good will. Sin was the wall that separated us from our God. Do not here think in terms of the sins of others. Your sin, my sin, separated you and me from *our* God. God himself removed that barrier by placing 100% of the blame and condemnation upon his innocent Son.

This was the final announcement by the angels – that the ultimate act of reconciliation and good will has been initiated by God in the sending of his Son as our Savior.

What then did the angels promise to the shepherds? Again, they *promised* nothing. They made declarations of truth that would stand for all time. To paraphrase their message: "*Glory is the sole possession of our God, for he has demonstrated his loving attitude toward mankind by restoring our relationship with him through the birth of his Son.*"

Glory is God's. A state of peace now exists between God and man – in Christ Jesus. God's good will has thereby been poured out upon all mankind. No wonder all creation should rightly rejoice at the birth of Jesus Christ. No greater news has ever been announced. The question is, are we listening? Really *listening* to such incredibly good news and giving it our undivided attention? Don't rob yourself by giving this priceless information anything less. Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Isaiah 7:10-17** Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, ¹¹ "Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven." ¹² But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test." ¹³ And he said, "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. ¹⁵ He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶ For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted. ¹⁷ The LORD will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah--the king of Assyria."

^{ESV} **Matthew 1:18-25** Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ²³ "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). ²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵ but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

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Fourth Sunday in Advent – December 18, 2016

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 71 (Red Hymnal)

"Watchmen Tell Us of the Night"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The Old Testament Lesson: (Isaiah 7:10-17) When it comes to discrediting Holy Scripture, mankind can be very inventive. That is why a big part of the hardship borne by the believer in the last days will be dealing with the disrespect and condemnation brought by the world against God's Word. So in this lesson the very fact of the virgin birth is today brought into question. For us the question is settled in the New Testament, where our next Scripture reading will remove all doubt.

Psalm of the Day – Psalm 2 (Supplement page 30) (Brown Hymnal)

The New Testament Lesson: (Matthew 1:18-25) The best interpreter of Scripture is Scripture itself. We need not wonder if the sign God promised to King Ahaz was that a *virgin* would conceive or just a young maiden. We need not wonder if Mary's divine conception was in fact a fulfillment of the prophecy we just read from Isaiah 7. The Scriptures themselves tell us it is so. Jesus was and is the One promised by God.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed – page 15. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 76 (Red Hymnal)

"A Great and Mighty Wonder"

The Sermon – Text: Luke 2:8-14 (Printed on the back page)

"Are You Listening?"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 75 (Red Hymnal)

"Ye Sons of Men, Oh, Hearken"

The Offering

The Prayers followed by the Lord's Prayer

The Closing Hymn - 704 (Verses 1 & 6) (Brown Hymnal)

"Oh Lord, How Shall I Meet You"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

Attendance - Sunday (40) Ave (46) Wednesday (20)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Christmas Eve Rehearsal
	-10:00 a.m.	– Sunday Worship Service
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship Meal
	-12:00 p.m.	– Voters and WF Meetings
Wednesday	-6:00 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
Saturday	-5:00 p.m.	– Christmas Eve Service
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– No Sunday School or Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Christmas Day Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship/Coffee Time

CLC News – Pastor Luke Bernthal has accepted the call to St. Stephen of San Francisco. Pastor Frank Gantt is considering the call to Zion of Atlanta. Pastor Douglas Libby has accepted a one-year call to serve Living Savior of Eden Prairie, MN on an expanded basis. Pastor Matthew Ude is scheduled to be installed as pastor of Faith of Markesan on January 8.

Snow – If anyone is in need of any extra snow, St Paul has opened a Snow Pantry that will give to anyone in need. Please contact Trustee Coordinator Brian Fettig.

Meetings – Our Annual Voters' meeting and a Women's Fellowship meeting are scheduled for this morning. A fellowship meal is also planned. Visitors please join us for the meal. There is always more than enough. We are serving snow cones.

Christmas Schedule – Please note the start time (5pm) for the Christmas Eve service this Saturday. Please also plan to attend the Christmas Day service next Sunday at 10am.

Confirmation Class – Confirmation parents and students note that the start time for Confirmation classes returns to 6 pm beginning this Wednesday. There is no midweek Bible Study until December 28.

Usher/Cleaner List – The first draft of the 2017 Usher/Cleaner list is on the mailbox table. Please take a look and make Fred Adams aware of any changes that need to be made.