

Christmas: “An Emotional Rollercoaster” “PEACE”

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The Emotional Christmas Rollercoaster stops dead in its free fall at the announcement with the coming of the Bethlehem Baby; that there would be Peace on Earth. There has been anything but! A former president of the Norwegian Academy of Science has come up with some startling information: Since 3600 B.C. (that’s about 5,600 years) the world has known only 292 years of peace! During this same period there have been 14,350 some odd wars, large and small, in which approximately 3.6 billion people have been killed, and 8,000 peace treaties broken. Peace on Earth...hardly.

So what of this precocious promise made to lowly shepherds? Were the angels mistaken, were they misguided, were they nuts, or were they speaking of a different kind of peace? Ah, our commonest definition of Peace is: a lack of war, and as we all know, the world into which Jesus entered was filled with war; political, territorial, racial, and religious; just a few of the conflicts that welcomed the Messianic manger dweller; and unfortunately just a few of which still exist today.

I’m not sure the Shepherds initial response (though not recorded) was all that different from what ours would be if we encountered the Angel’s message today, of ‘Peace on Earth.’ That response reminds me of one of my favorite Peanuts Comic Strips. If you read Peanuts you remember the animosity between Charlie Brown and Lucy. For that matter, it was animosity between Lucy and just about everyone else. Well, one Christmas Lucy comes to Charlie Brown and says: “Merry Christmas, Charlie Brown. This is the season of peace on earth and good will toward men. Therefore I suggest we forget all about our difference and love one another this Christmas day.”

Charlie Brown's face lights up like a Christmas tree, and he says; "That's great, Lucy, but can't we continue to do that all year long?" And Lucy replies, "What are you, nuts?" Peace on Earth, the angels declared, and looking around we each might join the shepherds and reply: "What are you, nuts?" No they weren't nuts, they were speaking very specifically of a different kind of peace, we must consider today; because; **Peace** can be a reality by what is found in the manger. What is this peace?

1. PEACE WITH GOD

The key to understanding this paradox may lie in the little phrase: "*Peace on Earth; to those with whom God is pleased.*" It sounds rather exclusive, but maybe there is deeper truth to be found in considering Peace within this condition. The Psalmist reminds us in the 29th, verse 11 that "*God makes his people strong. God gives his people **peace.***" Paul writing to the Philippians reminds them as well:

*Paul and Timothy, both of us committed servants of Christ Jesus, write this letter to all the followers of Jesus in Philippi, pastors and ministers included. We greet you with the grace and **peace** that comes from God our Father and our Master, Jesus Christ.*
Philippians 1:1

Say what you wish about other religions, other faiths, other denominations or churches, there is only one source of peace...and that is God. There is only one source of real, true, lasting, everlasting peace...and that is God. There is only one sense that Peace might ever be any kind of reality in this war-filled world...and that is God!

Maybe, just maybe, the angel's prophetic prediction was more than just a promise; it was a roadmap, an outline, a condition of entrance, a pathway to peace; and that road is none other than the God who chose to become human in the strangest of places, a manger in Bethlehem. And my friends, if you sit here this morning and know no peace...you must find God; for in God there is Peace, and no where else.

I can't explain the thousands of wars and millions of deaths they have caused, but I can explain to each of 'us' this simple reality: that only in a personal, intimate, living, growing relationship with God will any of us ever find peace. And only as individuals make their peace with God will there be God-loving leaders, leading God-fearing countries that might seek to establish God-pleasing conditions where God's message might grow and take root.

Let there be peace on earth...and let it begin with me. Not just a sentimental ballad, but an authentic response to the angel's message, and each of the shepherds points the way...to the manger...to Jesus...to Peace Secondly this new-defined peace must include:

2, PEACE WITH OTHERS

Two passages, again from Paul add insight into the reality of peace as more than just a mere absence of war:

*Let the **peace** of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing. Col. 3:15*

*May the Master of **Peace** Himself give you the gift of getting along with each other at all times, in all ways. May the Master be truly among you! 2 Thessalonians 3:16*

Mahatma Gandhi was one of the first, and Martin Luther King Jr. one of the most recent to advocate that Peace was not just a lack of violence, but the presence of justice. They each described this condition as 'positive peace', and literally gave their lives in the hope of helping to create it. Their dream must remain our vision, if we who claim the name wish to be faithful to that name. For it was originally Jesus who said, '*if you do it unto the least of these my brothers and sisters, you do it unto me.*'

This is no backhanded socialistic plea for a redistribution of wealth, but an 'in your face' reminder that '*to whom much has been given, much will be required.*' We have been given much...and we must continue to give much!

I believe that the Angels understood very well, that these lowly shepherds were the chosen recipients of this message, because their status in life would uniquely qualify them to remind all of us that we have a role to play in creating this peace on earth.

Peace is not just a gift we seek and receive from God, it is a reality that we are called by God to help create; and we do so by the ways we treat the people that live nearest to us. We can't decry the wars and rumors of war abounding, while we live in repairable disharmony between brothers and sisters, parents and children, friends and neighbors. This is no utopian 'pipe dream', but a scriptural appeal to set things right with those in your circle of influence...and maybe your personal peace might help create a global peace! You never know!!

The angel's prediction of peace most likely took on a very personal nature; between those we love, and even within ourselves, and to that we turn finally;

3. PEACE WITH YOURSELF

*I've told you all this so that trusting me, you will be unshakable and assured, deeply at **peace**. In this godless world you will continue to experience difficulties. But take heart! I've conquered the world. John 16:33*

If we can settle the Peace with God issue, and if we might seriously reconcile estranged relations with our family and friends, we are well on our way to discovering Peace within. But I found interesting a study conducted by Duke University on "Peace of Mind", which listed 7 factors that contribute to one's peace of mind. Let's take a look:

1) The absence of suspicion and resentment. Nursing a grudge was a major factor in unhappiness, and internal disharmony.

2) Not living in the past. An unwholesome preoccupation with old mistakes and failures leads to depression. Longing for by-gone days never improves today.

3) Not wasting time and energy fighting conditions you cannot change. Cooperate with life, instead of trying to run away from it.

4) Force yourself to stay involved with the living world. Resist the temptation to withdraw and become reclusive during periods of emotional stress.

5) Refuse to indulge in self-pity when life hands you a raw deal. Accept the fact that nobody gets through life without some sorrow and misfortune. Take your lumps, trust in God...move on.

6) Cultivate the old-fashioned virtues--love, humor, compassion and loyalty.

7) Find something bigger than yourself to believe in. Self-centered egotistical people score lowest in any test for measuring happiness.

I know this is only one test, but it provides a good starting place to work out how to maintain Peace with Yourself.

One of the most beloved Christmas hymns; "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day"; has a remarkable story behind it. Based on a poem written by one of America's most beloved poets: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow; this hymn contains amazing insight into this condition we have been discussing. It was written in 1864 in the middle of the devastating American Civil War, and following the news that his son Charles Appleton Longfellow had suffered severe wounds in a battle. That news came on the heels of his second wife's untimely death in their home following a tragic fire only 2 years earlier. From that day till this, Longfellow's journal entries contained much pain, anger, remorse, sadness, even some self loathing, and a bit of God-hating. Most hymnals contain 5 verses, but there were 7, let me recite them all, in their original order.

"Christmas Bells"

"I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along
The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till, ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime
A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And now those two left out verses, that speak of the agony of living in this peaceless time in America's history:

Then from each black accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound
The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn
The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And then these final two stanzas, which speak of personal testimony to the condition of his own heart, his own suffering, his own renewed... 'peace'.

And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead; nor doth he sleep!
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men!"

It matters not the condition of the world, there is...there can be...there must be peace on earth again this Christmas season. It has nothing to do with war, or conflict, or hatred, or prejudice, or estrangement, or suffering, or self-loathing...it has everything to do with the fact that God is not dead, nor doth he sleep...the wrong shall fail, the right prevail and peace will reign on earth once again.

Do you have peace with God? With your neighbors, family members and friends? Do you have peace in your soul? If so, then sing now with great thanksgiving. If not, then bow humbly this Christmas morning, and make things right...NOW!

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STUDY/DEVOTIONAL GUIDE FOR CHRISTMAS EMOTIONS:
“PEACE”

MONDAY: Read and prayerfully meditate on Isaiah 32, especially noting the concept of Peace discussed in verses 14-16. Then take a minute and write your own definition of Peace.

TUESDAY: Read and prayerfully meditate on Isaiah 9:1-7 and Luke 23: 4-6. Consider the contrasting understanding of who Jesus was understood to be. What was the difference? Which description of Jesus most resonates with you...why?

WEDNESDAY: Read and prayerfully meditate on John 14. Especially pay close attention to verses 25-29. What is the gift that Jesus promises to leave with us? What/who is the agent of bringing this gift? Why is His gift impossible for us to receive anywhere else?

THURSDAY: Read and prayerfully meditate on 2 Corinthians 13. Especially note what the final result will be if we obey the commands and abide by these suggestions? Do you have that peace in your life? Are you obeying those commands?

FRIDAY: Read and prayerfully meditate on Ephesians 2. In this chapter note the references to peace. Who receives peace? Why? How? Were you an insider or an outsider when you first received peace?