

CHRISTMAS: IT'S NOT YOUR BIRTHDAY 3

"It's the birth of Peace!"

Think with me for a minute about the kind of world into which Jesus was born. It was a place and time when Rome dominated the world landscape. They and their various Caesar's ruled with iron fists. Individual local government leaders were paid by Rome to enforce Rome's unjust political agenda's, including the rampant taxation necessary to feed this gigantic government machine. Any of that sound familiar?

Rome's armies were the known-worlds, peace-keepers, enforcing their own brand of "Marshall Law", to keep commoners and non-compliant foreigners alike, in line. The reach of Caesar's rule was vast, and wide, and corrupt. The Herod's and Augustus' were bought off cronies, drunken mouth pieces saying and demanding what they were told to say and demand.

The people (as you might imagine) lived in fear, even the good Roman citizens; to say nothing of the Jews and Gentiles who occupied the far from Rome lands of Palestine, Judah, Galilee, and Israel. The people found little solace in the perverted religious practices offered by the silly Pharisees, and the temple became just another place to conduct illegitimate business, but now in the name of God. This land of lawlessness led to an inevitable individuality, which found people seeking to make their own way, their own lives, their own laws, their own reality. Into this world, a baby, a Savior, the Messiah, Yes, the Lord was born. And what announcement accompanied this humble Bethlehem birth?

Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased. Luke 2:14

Was there a time in history when the world needed peace more than it did then? Well, probably, and might that time be...now...maybe! Fast- forward 2000 years or so. We still have many people buying into and believing that government, whether Democratic or Republican, Socialistic, or Capitalistic; can provide the safety and security demanded by this terror-stricken and fear-filled world in which we now live. There are many Christians who have abdicated their personal and 'church' responsibilities to care for the poor, the elderly, the widows, the prisoners, and the outcasts; instead looking to the government to bail out all who have their hand out.

There are many others who look to our powerful armies to protect us, and all who are weak. As vast and strong and committed and "to be commended" are our soldiers; they are unable to provide, and maintain world peace. Terrorism is an insidious enemy, motivated by inglorious greed, unbridled jealousy, and unfettered hatred. Terrorism wears many masks, and hides in many places, and cowardly emerges at times to remind us that our "peace" is tentative at best, and temporal as well.

There are similar reactions to "church" today, as there were in Jesus' day. The church has moved from the mainline, to the sideline of our society. Where once churches stood proudly and stately on street corners of prominence, and maintained a degree of respect in societies psyche; they subsist now as abandoned wrecks existing with exhausted remnants; while increasingly ignored by the vast majority with whom they co-exist in this life, on this planet. It is a rare church indeed that can claim to be the powerful force it was destined to be; healing the wounded, curing the blind, feeding the poor, clothing the naked, empowering the powerless, engaging the masses, enlisting the compassionate in meaningful ways. Yes, the church of today; looks sadly similar to those in Jesus' day.

And, there are certainly similarities between the 1st Century and the 21st Century individual. We, as they, are convinced that our human ingenuity alone can solve all our problems, salve all our consciences, and save our own skin! We don't need to rely on superstitious, mythological miracles, when we can explain everything scientifically. We don't need to fight our way out of hell or find our way into heaven, we just use our vast intellects to redefine both, until they no longer exist...in our minds or our society. Salvation becomes then, not so much about sacrifice, and commitment and obedience, as it does being educated, intelligent, and self-sufficient.

Into this world, even today, a faint baby cries, and the birth announcement includes these words:

Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased. Luke 2:14

We better find out what it means to be those "*with whom God is pleased!*" cause I'm not so sure He's that pleased with us! We keep looking in wrong places to find the peace we so desperately need, and so delusionally ignore. The government can't legislate our peace, the army can't guarantee us peace, our wealth and ingenuity can't buy us peace, and too often too many churches are hurting and not helping this tragic situation! It's time we discovered what it means to be those "*with whom God is well pleased!*" It's time we took another look at this infant lowly, infant holy. It's time we take another look at this crucified Messiah. It's time we find the Risen Savior...not in some fairy tale fantasy, but in our sin-filled reality! It's time we figure out what's really at stake as we face the ending of our lives, whether by death or God's closing time return! It's time we get a realistic handle on the fact that Christmas is not our Birthday...but it is the birth of Peace!

Corrie Ten Boom, that humble German saint of a woman, who along with her elderly father and ailing sister hid hundreds of Jews, and saved them from certain Nazi death, recounts a fascinating story. It happened during the early days of the German invasion, and subsequent bombing of their beloved city. So intense was the warfare going on outside their humble home, that her sickly sister awakened Corrie in the middle of the night, with shrieks of fear. Corrie gathered her sister in her arms, comforting her and said: "Let me tell you of the dream I was having. We were sitting in our dining room, on this very night, having tea. There were 4 cups prepared; one for me, one for you, one for Papa, and one for Jesus. The bombings were going on loudly around us, but we drank our tea, and took our ease." Little sister could make no sense of the casualness with which they drank their tea, while their city was under siege, and their lives were in danger, and their house was exposed, and their neighbors were being destroyed. "How can we drink tea, at a time like this." demanded Corrie's sister? "We can drink tea because Jesus drinks with us!"

We can have peace, in spite of the government's inability to legislate it. We can have peace, even when our armies can't guarantee it. We can have peace even when the markets crash and our human abilities fail us. We can even have peace when the church misses the mark and falls short. How? We can have peace because Jesus was born in a manger, died on a cross, rose from the dead, and is coming again, that's how!

What does it mean to be "One with whom God is pleased?" It means that we come again on bended knee to the manger where he was born. We find there not just a helpless infant, cute baby Jesus, but the prospect and potential and hope that we have longed for all our lives, and can find nowhere else.

To be “one with whom God is pleased”, means that we come again...on bended knee...to the tree upon which hangs our savior, and our sin! Being “one in whom God is well-pleased”, means acknowledging and admitting that Jesus’ resurrection is a real event, which makes all the difference in the world...and in MY life! I/you/we may have believed it all your life...but today its time you make it real! To be “one with whom God is pleased”, simply means that you stop living your life your way, and start living your life, God’s way! It’s the only way to know God’s peace.

In the midst of the wars going on around us in Washington, Bagdad, Kabul, and Bismarck, even in Bismarck First United Methodist Church...we can have tea...because Jesus drinks with us! If you want peace in your life, and in our world...then you must have Jesus in your life! It might mean taking intentional steps to mend some fences in your family or other relationships. It might mean getting off your self-sufficient high horse, and back on your knees before the baby. It might mean admitting your sin, failure, and mistakes, to the outstretched arms of your awaiting Savior. It might mean giving yourself to the Resurrected Lord, and living your life for Him, instead of for yourself. It might even mean that you become part of the solution, instead of part of the reason the church has been ineffective as God’s agent of transformation in His world. The old bumper sticker is still true: No God – No Peace...Know God – Know Peace. Would you like to know Peace today? Then come, get to know God...it’s His Birthday!