

GLORY TO GOD...AND ON EARTH, PEACE

Selected Scripture

Introduction:

Today we lit the second candle of the Advent wreath – the second week of Advent. It is often called the Bethlehem candle, or the candle of peace. It is only 2½ weeks until Christmas Day. What is life like for you? Is it a time of peace? Or is it all busyness and rushing and conflict?

This morning I want us to look for just a few moments at this little town of Bethlehem and the promise of peace, and see how the two are connected.

Bethlehem – a place of pain

Bethlehem has a long history of pain and trouble. In many ways it seems like the most unlikely place to be associated with peace.

A few years ago I gave a message entitled Bethlehem's Pain, Bethlehem's Promise. I would like to revisit some thoughts from that message for a few minutes here this morning.

In Gen. 35 we find the first mention of Bethlehem in the Bible. It was in the region where Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin. (review the incident – vv. 16-20) It was there near Bethlehem that Rachel was buried, and Jacob mourned for his wife.

There is another significant mention of Bethlehem. It is found in the book of Ruth. Read Ruth 1:1-2 – Elimelech moves his family from Bethlehem to Moab, because of a famine in the land. While in Moab, Elimelech died. Their two sons also died. But Naomi eventually returned to her home in Bethlehem with her daughter-in-law, Ruth after several years in Moab (read vv. 19-21). For Naomi Bethlehem was a place associated with bitterness and pain. There was the pain of famine that had driven them away, and there was the pain of coming home with the grief of having lost her husband and her two sons.

There is one other Scriptural reference, I would like to mention in connection with Bethlehem and its surrounding region. It is found in

Jeremiah 31:15 – “Thus says the LORD: “A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.”

In the context of this verse, the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel is identified with Rachel weeping for her sons, Joseph and Benjamin. It refers to Ramah, which was actually a town about 5 miles north of Jerusalem, while Bethlehem was 5 miles south. However, there is a region between Jerusalem and Bethlehem traditionally called Ramah. So again you have this area around Bethlehem associated with pain and suffering. Matthew makes this association between Ramah and Bethlehem in ch. 2:18 when he quotes this verse in reference to the order of Herod to kill the children in the region of Bethlehem, in his attempt to destroy the Christ Child.

Matt 2:17-18 “Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: ‘A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.’”

So, Bethlehem is very much associated with pain and suffering. It was a place of sorrow, grief and loss. Yet, in spite of all of this, Bethlehem was the place chosen by God to be the birthplace of the Messiah, the Prince of Peace.

Bethlehem – a place of peace

Go to Micah 5, read vv. 2-5a. – “...he shall be their peace.”

Imagine the scene in Bethlehem at the time of Jesus birth:

- the edict from Rome for everyone to register for taxation
- hundreds of people in a little town like Bethlehem for the registration
- The inn in Bethlehem – overcrowded with travellers – probably a lot of noise and short tempers.
- Joseph desperately looking for a place with quiet and privacy for Mary to rest and give birth to her baby.

It certainly did not seem like a place of peace. It is hard to imagine much peace in the hearts of Mary and Joseph as they settled into the stable that night. And yet ... that night, with all of the hustle and bustle

of a busy crowded village not far away, the Prince of Peace entered this weary world.

Look for a moment at the cry of the angels that night just before they left the shepherds. Luke 2:14 – “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth *peace* among those with whom he is pleased.”

No, the world into which Jesus came was not particularly peaceful, but he came to bring peace. Some 33 years later, just near the end of Jesus’ life here on earth, he said to his disciples, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” ... my peace ... not as the world gives ...

We live in a troubled world. War, violence, crime, discontent, financial worry, economic disaster. On Friday as I worked through this message, I went to the internet. My web browser opens to the Google News page. Here are a few of the headlines that came up:

- **U.S. Plans to Neutralize Syrian Chemical Weapons at Sea**
- **France warns Africa it must 'take charge of own security' as troops enter the Central African Republic**
- **Attack on Yemen's Defense Headquarters Is Linked to Al Qaeda**
- **Victims of Montreal massacre remembered**
- **Teenager charged after stolen vehicle slams into police cruiser**

No, our world does not seem very peaceful. People are worried and upset. People and nations are in conflict, fighting, at war with one another. We don't see much in the way of peace. But the peace that Jesus came to give is different than the peace the world talks about. The peace He offers is possible even when there is no outward peace.

We read in Micah the assurance, “...he shall be their peace.” That promise was made to God’s chosen people, the nation of Israel. I want to take you briefly to a passage in the NT, in Ephesians that extends that promise to all of us. Turn to Eph. 2:11-18. “For He himself is our peace,...” (v. 14)

What does that mean for us? It means we can be reconciled to God. It means that peace has been established between two parties who were estranged – you and God.

Salvation application and invitation. Through the cross of Christ we are invited into a relationship of peace with God. Jesus came into the world in a stable, in a troubled and noisy little town called Bethlehem to bring peace to a troubled world, and to bring peace to troubled hearts.

Prayer – invitation