

The Gift of Peace
Isaiah 9:2-6, Luke 2:1-14

Friends, this past week on Dec 8th marked the 30th anniversary of John Lennon's untimely death and whether you're a fan of Lennon or not, he is famous for many things including the protest song – "give peace a chance"

Maybe you've heard it before – it goes "All we are saying is give peace chance" (Don't worry I won't be trying to record a John Lennon tribute album anytime soon.) But John Lennon recorded this song in 1969, in a hotel room in Montreal.

And this song quickly became the anthem for a generation of young people in the 1970's, a generation of young people who were tired of war, race and class struggles and they wanted a new way of "running" the country and the world.

They wanted the government to "Give peace a chance" In other words they didn't believe that it was necessary to use violence and go to war against other countries in order to protect the interests of the West.

And that's a debate that still goes on today – how do we respond to the threat of Islamism and terrorism? Some favor military action, others are still echoing the refrain of John Lennon's song- "Give peace a chance"

But that raises the question – what can peace do? What are we giving it a chance to accomplish?

Will peace solve the problems of society like poverty and homelessness?

Will peace help people love each other?

Will it bring understanding and tolerance?

Will it enable people to overcome differences and disagreements?

Or is peace the result of something else taking care of these issues.

Friends, it's unfortunate news to share, but peace can't accomplish any of these things. That's because peace is a state of being, it's an end result, it's a situation which has developed

because of events or certain actions, peace happens, peace is caused. You can have peace for many different reasons.

Children may be at peace because they are sleeping

Families may be peaceful because they love each other

Co-workers may get along because they are paid to

One nation may stop fighting another nation because they have a more powerful ally.

And 2000 years ago when Jesus Christ was born, there was peace in the Middle East and all around the Mediterranean.

There were no disputes about land, or territory, no worries about nations invading, you could travel freely, trade was flourishing, and for most people life was stable and predictable and good.

It was a time which the historians call the Pax Romana – the Peace of Rome. There was peace because of the Roman Empire. And it had began with good laws based on moral ideals, it ordered society, it would not tolerate rebellion, and Rome had the armies to enforce its way of life all across Spain, Europe, the Middle East and North Africa.

And I wonder friends, how many of us experience a peace in this way. Peace - like the Peace of Rome – as result of something, a peace that comes from external forces which keep internal rebellion in check.

In other words your life is free from conflict and upheaval – you're at peace, life is mostly good... but only because something is keeping the anger and frustration that you feel inside from boiling over and spilling out on those around you and disturbing the peace.

Maybe you do Yoga, maybe you exercise, maybe you have a Zen garden where you rake the sand, or you just plain old count to ten – and this helps to calm you, and keep you at peace.

So whenever your neighbors play their music too loud and keep you up, when your kids exasperate you with their attitude, when your boss is on your case – you turn to these things and keep the peace.

But what if there was something that changed you on the inside so that you wouldn't get frustrated, you wouldn't feel anxious, and you didn't get offended so easily? Something that would make external means unnecessary.

Friends, the good news that I have to share with you today is that at Christmas God wants to give us the gift of peace.

And I want to share more with you about how God gives us that gift, because it's easy to think that all I am saying in this message is simply "give peace a chance." That I'm telling you "if you want to have peace, just be peaceful."

Be remember, peace is the result of something else, and in the story of Jesus birth we discover what has happened which results in "peace on earth."

We all remember the phrase which the angels sang? Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace to all men... But its that last part of the announcement which is so important. "On whom his favor rests!"

That's the clue! You see most times we're so focused on the peace. - Christmas is about peace, peace on earth right, world peace – we're focused on the result.

But the means by which this peace is accomplished is *God's favor*. When God favors you, it brings peace in your life!

And I think most of us would have a pretty good understanding what peace is, even if we can't give the best definition of it. We certainly know when we are experiencing it or when we're not and it's a wonderful gift to receive from God, but it's a result - and we learn from the Christmas story that it's a result of God's favor.

But who are the Angels speaking about when they say "on whom His favor rests"? Who does God favor?

Well, the bible is pretty clear on that – God had established a special relationship with Abraham and his descendents, the nation of Israel. This is what he told Abraham.

² *"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.*

³ *I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” (Gen 12:2-3)*

And later on when God had increased his descendents and made them into a nation God said this:

⁷ *I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, (Exodus 6:7)*

So, who does God favor? The bible is clear – God favors his people, the nation of Israel. But, before we start complaining that God plays favorites and that it doesn’t seem fair, remember why God favors them. Don’t forget the reason why God established a special relationship with them.

Friends, the prophet Isaiah tells us God intended Israel “*to be a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.*” (Isaiah 49:6)

God favors the few for the sake of the many. He chose Israel in order to choose us.

And with the birth of Jesus Christ, God was taking actions to ensure that his salvation would indeed reach the ends of the earth, and have his favor be extended to all people – to us, to you and me, and it would result in peace in our lives.

That’s why the bible says “*for God so loved the world, that he sent his only Son*” (John 3:16). That’s why the Angels can say the birth of Jesus Christ means peace on earth.

It’s the result of God becoming one of us in Jesus Christ and changing what it means to be human from the inside out. Yes... Jesus Christ would make peace between God and humans by offering his life to pay the debt of our rebellion – as we celebrate at Easter.

But... what we may not realize about why Christmas is so important is the fact that in his conception and birth, Jesus took on our human nature and was born as a prototype of a new human being that was not affected by sin or evil, a human being who was at peace from the inside out! – And friends, **this incarnation** is God’s favor to all people which will result in peace on earth.

This is why we say – “know Jesus know peace, no Jesus no peace!” Friends, when people come to know Jesus, the Holy Spirit begins to change them into the kind of new human beings that Jesus was.

Paul writes about *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Cor 5:17)*

And with the new creation comes peace. Peace that comes from knowing you are forgiven for the wrong you’ve done, peace in knowing that you are loved no matter what. Peace because you don’t need to be afraid - God will look after you and protect you, peace with others because we have Christ’s love in us, peace with yourself because you know the truth of who you are and of who you are becoming.

And I say “becoming” because this is a work in progress. When God first sent Jesus Christ, the Word became flesh and our flesh was saved in Christ. But it is an ongoing work in our lives to have that salvation applied to the whole of what it means for us to be human. It happens over time as the Holy Spirit works in us and eventually that work bears fruit.

So, this Christmas - as a result of understanding God’s favor, in grasping the significance of the incarnation, and just simply hearing that you are offered the gift of peace, - may you experience the result – peace - in your heart.

And God promises that this gift won’t loose its effect once the Christmas season is done. Instead the scripture tells us *“that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” (Phil 1:6)*

So until He returns may Christ work in you and make you more and more at peace, less angry, less frustrated and irritated, more resistant to being offended, more willing to forgive and understand others, eager to extend grace and mercy – may you grow in being at peace from the inside out.

So Friends, all I am saying, Is that God gives us peace. Amen