

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Christmas 1

December 27, 2020

Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz

Peace came to earth

—Colossians 3:12-17

Peace came to earth at last that chosen night
When angels clove the sky with song and light
And God embodied love and sheathed his might—
Who could but gasp: Emmanuel!
Who could but sing: Emmanuel!

The Christmas tree has been beautifully decorated at our house for weeks; we put it up and decorated it right after Thanksgiving. At first it stood alone in the corner of the living room. Then, as Christmas approached, a present or two started appearing under the tree. Each one was carefully and beautifully wrapped. As the days and weeks passed, the pile under the tree grew. Each gift was carefully placed under the tree with a label—*To* and *From*. And as the number of gifts under the tree grew, so did the anticipation—not the anticipation to see what we would *get*. No, the anticipation was looking forward to the moment when each special gift would be *given*! We placed those gifts there under the tree because we wanted to *give*. We looked forward to the moment of surprise, astonishment, appreciation. We wanted to see the expression of joy and delight when the gift we gave was opened by the one who received it. We watched closely as the gift wrapping came off. We wanted the gift to be just right, something special, meaningful, useful, memorable. Above all, with each gift you gave you said something very special. You said to the one receiving the gift, “I love you. You are special. This gift doesn’t begin to say it all, but I want you to have this token of my love.”

Many of you gave gifts to us at Emmanuel this year. We thank you! You gave those gifts of love, and we want to say thank you—not only for the generous gifts, but for the outpouring of generous love that is behind the gifts.

You are God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved. Pause for a moment and allow those words to soak in. You are God’s chosen people. The elect. God chose you in Christ before time began. Before you began to exist, God knew you, loved you, and chose you to be his very own. It’s all God; it’s all God’s choice. If God knew you and chose you from eternity, before all worlds were created, then it wasn’t your choice; it was his. It was his grace, his undeserved love. He chose you for a special purpose. He chose you to be holy, set apart, different. He chose you to be pure, devoted to him, to be unstained, uncorrupted, untainted by sin. Because he chose you to be holy, he made you holy. He washed you. He washed your sins away in the blood of his Son. He brought you to the baptismal font, and there when he washed you with water in his name he gave you personally all the glorious gifts that Jesus won for you: a place in his God’s family, a beautiful robe of perfect righteousness, new birth and a new life, the forgiveness of sins, your inheritance in heaven.

God did all of this for you because he loves you. You are chosen. Holy. Dearly loved. If you are all these things to God, imagine the joy and delight in God’s heart, as he gives, as he gives his dearest Treasure. He gives us his Son, the Christ Child, born in Bethlehem, lying in a manger. Imagine the anticipation as God waits for the time to be fulfilled, for his precious gift to be given, conceived in a virgin’s womb, cradled in a virgin’s arms. The heavens themselves cannot contain the celebration as multitudes of angels praise God for his gift to the human race. This Christmas we celebrate God’s Greatest Gift. It’s the gift of his Son Jesus, and all the gifts he brought with him. Today we thank God for his gift of peace.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. The peace of Christ is peace with God. It’s the peace of having our sins forgiven. Our guilt is lifted. The barrier of hostility between us and God has been shattered and removed. We have been reconciled to God through the blood of his Son. Peace came to earth when God embodied love and sheathed his might, when Jesus Christ humbled himself to be born in poverty and subjected himself to death, even death on a cross. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the Only-Begotten, who came from the Father full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

The peace of Christ is the peace of knowing who you are: God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved. I’m coming back to this because it’s so important for you and me to understand: God wants you to know who you are! Maybe somewhere sometime someone told you that you were worthless. Or stupid. Or ugly. Maybe you’ve been

mocked and ridiculed, bullied, abused, shamed. Maybe you've been hurt, so you're afraid—afraid to trust, afraid to love. You're anxious, uneasy, always on guard. Perhaps you hide it well; maybe you've learned to put up walls because you don't want to be hurt again. Or maybe you've convinced yourself of those things, you beat yourself up over mistakes and failures, you feel inadequate as you compare yourself to others. God's gift to you this Christmas is peace in Jesus. The peace of Christ is the peace of knowing who you are. God says you are his chosen one, holy and dearly loved. A forgiven child of God, secure in God's grace. Your brother is the Prince of Peace.

The peace of Christ does not always mean peace in the world or with the world. Jesus, the Prince of Peace himself, said, "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword" (Matthew 10:34). What did Jesus mean? He meant very simply that because of him, people would choose sides, either with Jesus or against Jesus; there is no riding the fence with Jesus. The ungodly world is at war with itself, as conflict abounds in the world, and in our world, with the world around us we will experience conflict. We will pray with anguish for our neighbors, for our country, for members of our own family who are lost and perishing; these things will rob us of peace and make us unsettled. We will be ridiculed and hated when we take a stand against evil. If our Christmas hope is that we're just going to set aside all our differences and make nice and get along, the Christ Child isn't going to do that for us. He opposed evil, so we oppose evil. We stand against sin, wickedness, and rebellion against God. Even so, even in the face of opposition, you are still an ambassador of peace. You still hold out God's olive branch, offering peace to every individual human being. If your peace overture is spurned, that's not on you. If your message of peace is received, then another soul finds peace with God.

The peace of Christ does mean peace within the family of God. *As God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.* We know the peace of Christ in our hearts, and being chosen, holy and dearly loved means that Christ's peace overflows and spills from your heart to others. In *compassion* you empathize with the hurting, the lonely, the needy. Your heart is moved by Jesus' love. *Kindness* acts on that empathy. You reach out in Jesus' name to make a difference. To help, to give of yourself. In *humility* we consider others better than ourselves. We set aside our lofty egos, roll up our sleeves and are willing to get down in the mud to help someone in need. With *gentleness and patience* we are willing bear with others' sins and shortcomings. *We forgive* others as we ourselves have been forgiven. Have you been wronged? Let it go. Has someone hurt you? Forgive. If we have been so generously and graciously forgiven by our dear heavenly Father, at a cost no less than the blood of Jesus himself, how can we not forgive as we have been forgiven? How can we bear a grudge or be filled with resentment? *Forgive as the Lord forgave you.* When this spirit abounds in the church, when the Holy Spirit works this spirit among believers, then there is peace in the church, peace in the family of God.

The peace of Christ means peace in our hearts. There is plenty in today's world to get stressed about, and there are times when we find ourselves consumed by thinking about everything that is wrong and could go wrong. Don't do it. Don't let stress rob you of peace. Sometimes we still feel anxious, but we don't need to be. God's Word says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, present your requests to God. And the peace of God that transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7). "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7). God is bigger than our enemies, bigger than our problems, bigger than our worries, bigger than our debts, bigger than Covid. He's got it all in his loving hand. He's working out all things for the good of those who love him (Romans 8:28). Instead of stress and fear, be filled with thanks. *Be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

At our house the Christmas tree is still beautiful, and it's still standing. But now it stands alone again in the corner of the living room. The beautiful gifts have all been unwrapped, and each one brought joy to its recipient. The gifts aren't there anymore, but the love remains—and the peace. It's the peace the God came to deliver at Christmas, the peace he delivered to Simeon when he held the Christ Child and gazed into the face of God. Lord, now you let your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation.

Peace came to earth at last that chosen night. It's the peace of forgiveness, peace with God, peace with one another, peace in our hearts—all delivered to us in God's gift of perfect love, wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger. Amen.