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Peace in the Storms of Life
Matthew 2
December 7th, 2014, Jeff Germo

The Advent theme we are looking at this morning is Peace. In Luke 2:14, the Gospel writer records that a choir of angels promised God's peace would rest on those with whom he is pleased.

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Luke 2:14 (NLT)

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

What about me? Is God not pleased with me? Do you ever wonder how this is possible? **How is it possible to have peace when our lives are anything but peaceful?** If God promised his peace to everyone with whom he is pleased, how come I don't have it?

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Many of you are going through difficult times right now. You are suffering in some way. You may be suffering with your health. It might be that you have a relationship that is very difficult for you. Perhaps financially things are very tough and you don't know how to dig yourself out of the hole you are in. Or, maybe you feel like you are being put on the shelf, like God, or people seem to be overlooking you. It's like you are invisible. Maybe you are experiencing loneliness and you have no idea how to deal with the pain of isolation. Some of you might have children who are estranged from you.

These are all very painful things to deal with and they are exacerbated, for some strange reason, at Christmas time. How do you have peace in your heart when your situation is far from peaceful?

Jesus told his disciples, before he left them that he was leaving them with his peace.

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John 14:27 (NLT)

27 "I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid."

John 16:33 (NLT)

33 I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."

So, there must be something different about the kind of peace that Jesus came to bring.

For the Jews peace has been something that they have longed for their entire history, and it has been elusive. They have had a history of unrest.

¹ Special thanks to John Dunne Photography for the use of his photograph for the Power Point slides and bulletin. <http://www.johndunnephoto.com>

Let me ask you a question. What is the opposite of peace? Is peace the absence of war, or strife, or conflict, or turbulence, or trouble? Is it possible to have peace in your heart in the middle of the storms of your life?

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If I asked you what it feels like to lack peace, I would imagine each of you would know how to describe it. There is that unsettled feeling in the pit of your stomach. You look into the future and for whatever reason there is uncertainty or impending doom of some sort, and you get that feeling that starts in your stomach and moves up to your throat. You have a loss of appetite. It's hard to smile. You feel like you are in a deep dark gloomy pit that is impossible to climb up out of. It's a terrible feeling. I think you all know what I am talking about. Some of you are experiencing things in your life right now that are causing you to have some of those symptoms. You lack peace and you don't know what to do about it.

And yet, Jesus said that he is leaving us with a gift, peace of mind and heart. And the angels in Luke 2 promised that God has peace for those with whom he is pleased. So, what about me? Did God leave me on the shelf? Where is my peace?

When the angels proclaimed this there was anything but peace in Israel. Herod was in charge. He was a puppet king of Rome. He was a paranoid, self-possessed, egomaniac who was very jealous for his position.

There was an edict imposed by the emperor called the *Pax Romana*, or Roman Peace. It's wasn't a real peace. It was forced. And everyone in the Roman Empire, lived in fear of Emperor Caesar Augustus and King Herod, and the Jews were especially afraid of Herod because he was a sadistic, paranoid nutball who would do away with anyone he thought might threaten his position. He actually killed a couple of his sons, and at least one of his wives because he felt threatened by them. And he kept the Jews under his thumb and continually reminded them that they were under oppressive Roman domination.

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There was first century stoic philosopher from that time by the name of Epictetus who wrote, **"While the emperor may give peace from war on land and sea, he is unable to give peace from passion, grief and envy. He cannot give peace of heart, for which man yearns more than even for outward peace."**

So, at the time of this announcement from the angels there was a peace of sorts in the land. There was no major war in that area. But there was a longing in the heart of every Jew for a different kind of peace. It's the reason that Jews today still greet each other with greetings of shalom. If you meet a Jew in Israel they will greet you with, "Shalom." They long for peace and it seems elusive. This is the kind of peace that God offered through the gift of His Son.

With that background in mind let's read Matthew 2 so we can see what kind of king Herod was and the tumultuous situation Joseph and Mary experienced. What would it have been like for them to be running from a crazy king fearing for their lives and constantly looking over their shoulders? Keep that in mind as we read this.

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Matthew 2 (NLT)

¹ Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, ² “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him.” ³ King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem.

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⁴ He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, “Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?” ⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they said, “for this is what the prophet wrote: ⁶ ‘And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah, are not least among the ruling cities of Judah, for a ruler will come from you who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.’ ”

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⁷ Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared. ⁸ Then he told them, “Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!” ⁹ After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was.

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¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! ¹¹ They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod.

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¹³ After the wise men were gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up! Flee to Egypt with the child and his mother,” the angel said. “Stay there until I tell you to return, because Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.” ¹⁴ That night Joseph left for Egypt with the child and Mary, his mother, ¹⁵ and they stayed there until Herod’s death. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: “I called my Son out of Egypt.”

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¹⁶ Herod was furious when he realized that the wise men had outwitted him. He sent soldiers to kill all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under, based on the wise men’s report of the star’s first appearance. ¹⁷ Herod’s brutal action fulfilled what God had spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ¹⁸ “A cry was heard in Ramah— weeping and great mourning. Rachel weeps for her children, refusing to be comforted, for they are dead.”

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¹⁹ When Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt. ²⁰ “Get up!” the angel said. “Take the child and his mother back to the land of Israel, because those who were trying to kill the child are dead.” ²¹ So Joseph got up and returned to the land of Israel with Jesus and his mother.

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²² But when he learned that the new ruler of Judea was Herod’s son Archelaus, he was afraid to go there. Then, after being warned in a dream, he left for the region of Galilee. ²³ So the family went and lived in a town called Nazareth. This fulfilled what the prophets had said: “He will be called a Nazarene.”

So, you can see that there was anything but peace in Israel at that time. What would it have been like for Mary and Joseph? How could they have peace in their hearts with all of that turmoil and faithfully and courageously follow God? That's the question for us this morning?

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Every single one of us here this morning has a story. And our stories are peppered with pain, confusion, loneliness, fear, insecurities, broken relationships, illness, bitterness, abuse, and all kinds of other things that want to take our peace away. **How do we courageously walk with Jesus in the middle of all our stuff while maintaining peace in our hearts?** The question is easy. The answer, not so much. But, the Bible does give us an answer. Turn with me to Philippians.

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Philippians 4:4–9 (NLT)

⁴ Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice! ⁵ Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do. Remember, the Lord is coming soon. ⁶ Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. ⁷ Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.

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⁸ And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. ⁹ Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you.

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There are some things that Paul says here that seem like pat answers. ***Always be full of joy.*** Yeah right! You have no idea what I'm going through. You don't know the insecurity, fear and loneliness that I experience. How can you tell me to *always* be full of joy? Paul repeats it again for emphasis. ***I say it again—rejoice!***

And then he adds another seemingly trite exhortation. ***Don't worry about anything.***

How many of you have had the experience where you open up your heart to someone and dare to tell them about a fear you have or something that you are worried about. You make yourself vulnerable and the response you get is something like, "Don't worry. God is in control." They don't empathize you. They don't feel your pain or ask you any clarifying questions to try to understand where you are coming from. They just offer some platitude, that may be true, but it's given too soon for you to receive. "Don't worry. Be happy." How does that make you feel? Not very good right. It doesn't endear you to them. It doesn't cause you to want to open up to them or anyone else. It actually serves to shut you down and pretend that everything is ok. It makes you put on a mask. And you look around at other people in the church and they aren't talking about their fears or worries, so you keep your mask on. And it pushes you further into despondency and feelings of isolation.

That is not what Paul is doing here. What is his solution?

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His solution is, pray. ***Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done.*** Do you ever do that? Do you pour out your heart to God? This is very important. We don't have to pretend that we don't have fears and worries. It is not spiritual to keep all that bottled in. David often expressed his angst to God in the Psalms. God knows anyway. You cannot fool him.

I think we are usually pretty good at telling God what we need. That's the easy part. But, what about thanking him when we don't feel like it? That's a little harder isn't it? Here's a piece of practical advice.

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Try writing a gratitude journal.

Every morning in this journal write some things that you are thankful for. Keep a running list. Get into the habit of practicing thankfulness. And then reread it every so often. It will change your perspective about life.

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⁶ Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done.

Now lest you think this is the only place where Paul says this turn to 1 Thessalonians.

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1 Thessalonians 5:16–18 (NLT)

¹⁶ Always be joyful. ¹⁷ Never stop praying. ¹⁸ Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.

Always be joyful! **Never** stop praying. Be thankful in **all** circumstances. Really? That's easier said than done isn't it? It's much easier for us to whine and complain. Something doesn't go the way we want it to and what do we do? We take our proverbial ball and go home. We pout. We gossip. We complain. We bicker. We despair. What's the result of these kinds of attitudes? We become bitter angry people who are more concerned with ourselves than we are about living in the joy and peace of Christ.

Now, what happens when we do the opposite? What is the result of living a life of thankfulness, of having an attitude of gratitude?

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⁶ Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. ⁷ Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.

This is the secret to having real peace no matter what the circumstances. This is the Gospel of Jesus in action. It's not that we keep all our problems bottled up inside and pretend everything is ok. It's exactly the opposite. Paul said that we are to pray about everything, and then thank him, and that is when the peace will kick in.

A word of caution here. If someone comes to you and asks you to pray for them because of a deep concern they have, don't trivialize it by telling them not to worry. That's not your job. The Holy Spirit will do that. You listen, and empathize and pray. The Holy Spirit will begin a work in

our hearts when we pour out everything to him and the peace will come when we begin to thank him.

Paul continues in Philippians:

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Philippians 4:10–13 (NLT)

¹⁰ How I praise the Lord that you are concerned about me again. I know you have always been concerned for me, but you didn't have the chance to help me. ¹¹ Not that I was ever in need, for I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. ¹² I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. ¹³ For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength.

This is what the Gospel of Jesus does in our hearts as we learn to trust him. I'm not saying it's easy. I struggle just like you do, but as I have been training with Jesus he has been teaching me to trust him with everything. And as I begin to thank him for everything, he gives me his perspective and then the peace of Jesus begins to flood my soul. Peace does not come easy. Ironically, we need to wrestle for it and then in the wrestling we learn to give in to him and say, "Not my will, Lord, but yours be done."