

Will You Let Him In? Daniel Cote

2nd Congregational Church 12/8/24

Scripture Reading: Romans 12:16–21

Sermon Text: Luke 2:8–14

The second candle we light at Advent signifies **Peace** and reminds us that through the Messiah's death and resurrection, we have been reconciled to God and are at peace with Him through faith.

In an article in *The Atlantic*, Ross Andersen raises the question: "Did Humans Ever Live in Peace?" Archeologists have long had evidence of conflict between small rival groups. The earliest signs of war date back to the dawn of civilization and cities. But recent discoveries at LaGuardia, Spain, push proof of our warring inclination to the dawn of agriculture. War is, by definition, organized violence, and there is much evidence of it throughout recorded history. Hieroglyphic inscriptions tell us that more than 5,000 years ago, the first pharaoh conquered chiefdoms up and down the Nile Delta to consolidate his power over Egypt. A Sumerian poem suggests that some centuries later, King Gilgamesh fended off a siege at Uruk, the world's first city. But the new findings at LaGuardia and other sites across the planet now indicate that wars were also occurring at small-scale farming settlements all the way back to the dawn of agriculture, if not before.

For nearly a century, anthropologists have wanted to know how long people have been engaged in organized group violence. They argue that if warring among humans began only recently, then perhaps we might be able to reduce or eliminate it. The author of the article is somewhat optimistic that perhaps succeeding generations might put an end to the culture of war we find ourselves in that destroys the lives of millions. It is a wonderful thought, and all efforts should be made for just peace among nations, but human violence dates back to the third and fourth humans that lived on Earth, Cain and Abel. And in Matthew 24 and 25, Jesus warns that our future will be filled with war. Given the violence and war in our culture, how do we interpret the message of the angels to the shepherds, peace on Earth among men, in verse 14 of our Sermon text?

As we come to our text, Mary had just given birth to her firstborn Son, Jesus. The verse just before our sermon text, Luke 2:7, reads, "And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn."

Notice that the text refers to Mary's firstborn Son, seeming to imply that Mary had other children. If Jesus had been the only child of Mary, there would have been no reason to say that Jesus was her firstborn son because Jesus would have been her only son. In this case, Luke might have written in verse 7 that Mary gave birth to her son. However, Luke did not do that because Jesus had other siblings. The Holy Spirit fathered Jesus in the womb of Mary, and Joseph apparently fathered His other siblings. When Jesus returned to His hometown of Nazareth and preached profound parables about the kingdom of God, the Jewish leaders sought to diminish His teaching, saying in Matthew 13:55–56:

⁵⁵Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?

⁵⁶And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this man get all these things?"

This is not the only passage that refers to Jesus' family (see John 7:5). But just from this passage, it seems clear that Jesus was the firstborn of Mary and Joseph's large family, which included four named brothers, James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas, and at least two sisters. So Jesus came from a family of at least seven children. So, we see why Jesus is referred to as the firstborn. I am dwelling on this point for a reason. The Catholic church and even some of the

early Protestant reformers claim the doctrine of the immaculate conception, which supposes that Mary was born without sin in preparation for giving birth to Jesus, who was the perfect, sinless human being. Furthermore, the Catholic Church and even Luther and Calvin claim that Mary and Joseph produced no other children and that Mary was a perpetual virgin, never touched by Joseph. Today, evangelicals uniformly reject these doctrines, but the Catholic Church affirms them.

I have two observations at this point. The first is poor Joseph. Poor Joseph, if it were true, that he never enjoyed marital union with the wife He loved and supported through her pregnancy by the Holy Spirit. Second, from the verse I read from Matthew 13, the idea that Mary was a perpetual virgin is completely unbiblical. The Bible teaches that Jesus had brothers and sisters, and nowhere does it teach that Mary was a perpetual virgin. The idea that Mary was sinless is nowhere taught in the Bible and is contradicted by Paul, who says in Romans 5:12 that all have sinned. This is a case where man-made theology overrules the Bible, and when that happens, theology needs a proper smackdown. The Bible is the Word of God. Theology is the words of men, which need to be taken with a very large grain of salt.

However, the Bible teaches in at least six places that Jesus was born without sin. Paul, Peter, John, and the writer of Hebrews all teach that Jesus did no sin and had no sin in Him. When the Holy Spirit impregnated Mary, we must conclude that He removed the sin nature from the egg that produced Jesus. God, who created all life, could certainly accomplish that through the Holy Spirit.

I dwell on this matter because I believe that doctrines of the type I described strip away the humanity of Jesus, and that is wrong and unbiblical. Yes, Jesus is the sinless Son of God, but He took on human flesh and was intimately familiar with the human experience. He was born into a family of very humble means, so humble that his cradle was a manger, the feeding trough for animals. I bet you had a better crib than that. He had brothers and sisters and all the joys and troubles that that entails. He worked with his father, who was a carpenter, to make a living before he began His ministry. In Matthew 4, Jesus experienced temptation just like you experience temptation. In John 11, at the death of His friend Lazarus, Jesus wept. In Matthew 21, Jesus went to a fig tree, seeking to find figs to eat because He was hungry. In John 4, Jesus becomes tired in Samaria and takes a seat by Jacob's well there. Throughout the Bible, Jesus is criticized unjustly, just as we are sometimes criticized unjustly. In Philippians 2, we learn that Jesus set aside His divine prerogatives so He could take on human flesh to become like you. He did it so He could go to the cross to die for your sins.

Have you ever been in poverty? Have you ever dealt with sibling rivalry? Have you ever had to be concerned about making a living? Have you ever been tempted? Have you ever been sad to the point of weeping? Have you ever been tired and just plain worn out? Have you ever been hungry and in need of food? Have you ever been criticized unjustly? If you answer no to these questions, we would have to wonder if you were human because this is the common human experience that we all share. Jesus shared our human experience and completely understands us because He experienced all these things. That is why Hebrews 4:15 says, "For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin."

Jesus is our high priest; He is the intermediary between God and man, as Paul writes in 1 Timothy 2:5: "For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." Matthew 1:23 affirms this saying, "Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which translated means, "God with us." Jesus understands us, and He gets the challenges that we face in our lives. You can approach Jesus in the midst of trouble because He experienced the troubles humans encounter. We have a friend in Jesus.

As we come to our sermon text, the scene opens with shepherds watching their flock by night. Have you ever seen the show *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* hosted by Robin Leach in the 80s and 90s? There is no one rich and famous in the scene from our text, only shepherds, eking out a living by tending flocks. You see, the rich and famous are in palaces. While Jesus is the greatest King and the King of kings, He did not enter life in the way of kings. Human kings are born and live in palaces of opulence and splendor, but Jesus entered the world by the most humble of means, and thus, He fully understands us. In verse 9, an angel of the Lord appears before these humble shepherds, and our text says that the shepherds were terribly frightened, which is completely understandable because the angel shone like a heavenly being. This was terrifying for the shepherds, who were generally involved in caring for animals. The angel calms their fears, saying, in verses 10 and 11:

...“Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

The angel appeared to tell lowly shepherds in a field that God’s long-promised Savior, Christ, had been born in Bethlehem, the City of David. As you know, wherever you see the word Christ in the NT, you can replace it with the Hebrew word Messiah. David was born in Bethlehem, and the Savior was born in Bethlehem because it had been prophesied in Micah 5:2 that the Messiah, the eternal Servant of God, the Savior of His people, would be born there. The sign for the shepherds was that they would find this Messiah child lying in an animal feeding trough. How else would the shepherds have known how to find the Christ child? However, the unique circumstances of the birth of Jesus become a sign that will allow the shepherds to find Him. Since no other newborns were likely to be laid in an animal feeding trough, Jesus was probably not that hard to find.

The remaining two verses of our text declare the profound outcome of the Savior's birth, the Christ child born in Bethlehem. In verse 14, a great company of angels appeared with the first angel, praising God and proclaiming, “Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.” This verse teaches us that God’s peace is upon those with whom He is pleased. Not everyone! The peace of Christmas is for those with whom God is pleased!

So, with whom is God pleased? Hebrews 11:6 tells us that without faith, it is impossible to please God. How could God, who created all things, be pleased with someone who denies His existence? We must have faith in God to please God. So, too, Jesus says in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” Believing in Jesus is equivalent to having faith in Him, and faith in the Son pleases God. The bottom line is this. When we believe in God and His Son, we have peace with God. When we believe in the Savior that God sent, we have peace with God because we are reconciled to God through faith in Christ’s death and resurrection.

Now, some might ask, why do we need to be reconciled to God? The reason is that we were born with an inherent nature to sin, and the experience of every human since Adam and Eve is that we are sinners. Which of us can say we have perfectly kept the Ten Commandments throughout our lives? Disobedience to God’s moral law makes us enemies of God, as Paul says in Romans 5:10. Our only hope is reconciliation with God, which brings us peace with God. That is precisely why we need the Savior that was born on that first Christmas morning. And when we place our faith in Him, God is pleased, our sins are forgiven, we are reconciled to God, we are at peace with God, and we are adopted into God’s forever family.

So, this second Sunday in Advent, the question facing each of us is: Will we let Christ into our lives? Will we place our faith that reconciles us to God in Him? I suspect most here will enthusiastically answer in the affirmative. But I think we need to be not so quick in answering

that question. The profound truth about Christmas is that by the birth of a Savior, reconciliation with God is now possible for all who believe. But if we truly want to let our Savior into our lives we will also seek to be reconciled to those in our lives where there might be damaged or broken relationships. God forgives us in Christ and He expects that we will forgive others, and as Paul instructs us in our Scripture reading from Romans 12:18, “if possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.”

Jesus says in Matthew 6:14–15

¹⁴ “For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ “But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

If we are true believers, we must conform our lives to the teachings of Jesus. We must let Him in so that His teaching can transform us. Jesus teaches that we must forgive others. If we do not forgive others, we must face the fact that we are disobeying our Lord and Savior, and that is a sin. Notice that Jesus’ call for forgiveness does not come with disclaimers that apologies must be forthcoming from the offending parties. Jesus doesn’t give any conditions for forgiveness in Matthew 6:14-15, so He is teaching here that our forgiveness of others must be unconditional.

A young couple had their whole lives to look forward to, but the end came so much sooner than anyone expected. Having just been married in a brief ceremony five minutes earlier, Harley Morgan and Rhiannon Boudreaux were leaving the Orange County Justice of the Peace when their car collided with a pickup truck towing a trailer. The pickup driver was unharmed, but Harley and Rhiannon died at the scene. Harley was 19, and Rhiannon was 20 years old. The groom’s sister said everything happened so quickly that she doubted the two ever saw the truck coming.

Harley’s mother was following behind the couple and witnessed the accident firsthand. She said the couple planned to have a larger Christmas-themed wedding celebration with friends and family in December. But even in the midst of tragedy, she offered some advice that applies to all of us:

The only thing that they wanted was to get married and to start their life....Even if you’re mad, hug your family, love your family. Even if they’ve made you mad, make amends. Don’t go to bed angry because you don’t know. You don’t know how fast you can lose that person.¹

Will you let Jesus into your heart this Christmas? Forgive as you have been forgiven. Love as Jesus has loved you. Reconcile as you have been reconciled to God by the Christ child born so long ago. Tomorrow is not guaranteed. Do it today.

I do not believe we will lose our salvation because of an unforgiving spirit within us. In John 3:16, Jesus says, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” True belief in Jesus is the condition for salvation. Consider John 6:40, “For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day.” And in Psalm 103:11–12, we read, “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. ¹² As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.” East and West are in opposite directions, and by definition, the two never meet. They have no beginning, and the implication of this verse is that when we fear God because we believe in God, God removes our sins to a place where they cannot be found, and they will no longer be remembered.

However, failing to forgive our fellow man, who God created in His image, is a sin, and like all other sins, it erodes and breaks our fellowship with God. As Paul teaches us in our Scripture reading, God expects us to work for peace with others. God requires that we forgive

others, and what better time as we approach Christmas? At Christmas, Christ descended from His throne and humbled Himself to be born as a baby, a vulnerable child in lowly circumstances, to reconcile us to God. How much more should we seek to reconcile with others? We might think we are making others suffer and pay for their transgressions against us by not forgiving them, but exactly the reverse is true. When we do not forgive others, we suffer because by not forgiving, we destroy our personal relationship and fellowship with God. That is not a good place to be, so this Christmas, brothers and sisters, forgive those who have hurt you or sinned against you. In so doing, you will let Jesus into your heart and the true joy that only He can bring.

The movie *The End of the Spear* tells the true story of five missionaries in the 1950s who gave their lives to reach the violent Waodoni tribe in the jungles of Ecuador. Led by Nate Saint, the missionaries were eager to reach the Waodoni people before intertribal warfare and vicious revenge killings wiped out the population.

After landing their plane on a river sandbar, the missionaries were able to make contact with the Waodoni. However, the five men were later speared to death by a tribal war party.

Nate Saint's sister, Rachel, went to live with the Waodoni after her brother's murder, ministering to them until her death in 1994. When Nate's son, Steve, went to Ecuador for her funeral, he was caught up again in the drama of his father's martyrdom.

One of the Waodoni leaders, Mincayani, takes Steve by canoe to the sandbar where the wreckage of the missionary plane still lies. There, in an emotional conversation, Mincayani tells Steve that he was the one who speared his father. Mincayani then picks up his own spear and points it at himself, inviting Steve to avenge his father. Enraged and grieving anew, Steve grabs the spear and holds it to Mincayani's chest, about to run him through. But after a moment of weeping, he says, "No one took my father's life—he gave it," and he threw down the spear.² Perhaps we should do the same this Christmas!

At Christmas, Jesus came into the world to give His life so you could be reconciled to God. In obedience to God, forgive others and be reconciled to them. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Amen.

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/24/us/couple-dies-crash-wedding-ceremony/index.html>

² <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2006/february/10060213.html>