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IN PEACE THAT PASSES UNDERSTANDING Michael B. Beaugh  
Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:13-14 December 21, 2008  
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Sometimes – actually a lot of times - it is hard to see the nuances of meaning in Bible stories. For example, we read the Christmas story in Luke 2 starting with verse 1 and breeze right on through the birth of Jesus to the angels and shepherds and the baby in the manger. We set up manger scenes and even include the wise men although they didn't show up until a couple of years later and only in the gospel of Matthew. But that's okay because it all resonates with us somehow and makes for wonderful pageants and Christmas decorations.

But hold on just a minute! There is a not so subtle message in what Luke has written for us. I am sure he would not want us to skip over it. To the discerning eye, there is no doubt that verse 14 has a string attaching it back to verse 1.

In verse 14, there is what I call a trip word. You are reading merrily along when this word suddenly looms up and says, "Hold it just a minute! Do you realize what's going on here?" The trip word in verse 14 is "peace."

Think about it. One day, shepherds near Bethlehem are just doing their job, guarding their sheep at night. An angel materializes and tells them that a Savior, the Messiah, has been born. Suddenly a whole host of angels, literally a heavenly army, show up and sing the first Christmas carol. And what is the subject of the carol? Peace on earth. The subject could have been love, or forgiveness, or jingle bells. Of all the things the angels could have sung about, they sing about "peace on earth."

Now here's the connection with verse 1.

When Jesus was born, it was a time of peace like never seen before. It was the time of the great Pax Romana, when Rome ruled its vast empire with the mightiest armies ever assembled. If you were a Roman citizen, you could travel the roads across the empire without fear. You could amass wealth and enjoy the arts and spend your leisure time in your vacation villa. You could get into politics or study philosophy with the masters or sit around the Areopagus in Athens debating the issues of the day or just playing checkers with the old guys.

And guess who was responsible for this unprecedented time of peace? Emperor Augustus.

Verse 1 says, "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered." The discerning reader, coming to verse 14, where the birth of Jesus is connected with the coming of

peace, would have seen the obvious. Especially if the discerning reader was not a Roman citizen. Especially if the discerning reader was poor and powerless. Especially if the discerning reader had just lost his or her job, or lost his or her house, or lost his or her life savings.

Here's the obvious. Whatever peace Augustus maintained and even guaranteed, it was far from the kind of peace most of the world longed for. And far from the kind of peace promised by God.

The discerning ear could not help but hear the ringing words of the prophet Jeremiah 700 years earlier. Prophesying in his own day and time, he said, "For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have treated the wound of my people carelessly saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace." (Jer. 6:13-14)

Look beneath the surface, Jeremiah is saying. Look in the ghettos and barrios. Look at the A.I.D.S. children in Africa. Look in the board rooms where double dealings are going on. Look in the halls of congress. Look to see what is happening around kitchen tables. Look beneath the polite smiles and "Merry Christmases" in crowded malls. How can you say "Peace," when there is no peace?

Here is what Luke is telling us in verse 14. It is for this "beneath the surface world" that Jesus was born to bring peace on earth. No bail out can achieve it. No next president can give it. Caesar Augustus has no power or authority to make this peace happen or to prevent it from happening. The good news is that the author of this peace has been born, has come into the world and into our lives. The kind of peace that Jesus brings is a peace that passes all understanding.

Let's look at this peace that comes from God.

**Peace happens when we get right with God.** Jesus was born to make that happen.

When Adam and Eve goofed up in the Garden of Eden, they created a huge gulf that separated them from God. Every person since then has made the same mistake. This disobedience toward God has taken over to become our second nature. It is our second nature to disobey God. Our original nature was so created to live in fellowship with God, to love God, and to enjoy the blessings that come from loving God.

So long as we live out of this second nature, separated from God by our disobedience, we can have no peace. It is like insulting a friend. The insult creates a huge breach. It introduces conflict, a feeling of dis-ease, in a relationship that at one time was peaceful. We describe it as a broken relationship. We know how that works.

Jesus came to heal the breach between us and God so as to restore our peace with God. Jesus heals the breach through his life, death, and resurrection, and then empowers me through faith in him to live out of my first nature – to love God, to trust God with all my life, to enjoy the blessings that come from loving God. Heaven touches earth when by faith I invite Jesus into my life, when I give myself over to him.

Teresa gave me a Bible as a Christmas present two years before we married. It is pretty shop-worn, over 40 years old. One of the first verses I underlined in it is II Timothy 1:12. The Apostle Paul wrote these words to a young pastor named Timothy to encourage him. "For I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed to him against that day." That is peace. When you can live with that assurance, that is peace. That is the peace that passes all understanding. It is the peace that no one can take away from us.

**Peace happens when we reconcile with others.** Jesus was born to make that happen.

Reconciliation means restoring happy relationships based on mutual trust, concern, and respect. The Apostle Paul was big into reconciliation as the purpose of Jesus' coming. In Ephesians 2, he spoke of Jesus as the one who broke down the dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles. "In Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace." Paul called on Christians to be reconciled to one another, to practice the art of reconciliation. In another place, he called on husbands and wives to be reconciled to each other.

In Matthew 5:9, Jesus specifically addressed the issue of reconciliation when he said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." It amazes me how much of the New Testament is about relationships, how to live together so we don't kill each other. How to live together so all of us can thrive. Where did we ever get the idea that the Bible is simply a bunch of rules to keep? It is not about rule keeping. It is about relationship building. It is about conquering the second nature so we can live on this planet in peace and give glory to God.

Have you ever experienced the healing of a broken relationship? It is like heaven on earth, isn't it? We have only a certain amount of time on this earth. Our days are numbered. Why do we waste so many days in negative living? Why waste so much energy in conflicted relationships? We know the source of brokenness. It is our second nature. Jesus came to help us live out of our first nature.

**Peace happens when we live justly.** Jesus was born to make that happen.

Let me use some simple words to describe living justly.

Sharing what we have with others  
Avoiding over-indulgence and wasteful consumerism  
Living more simply  
Using our talents for the common good  
Being radically honest and accountable  
Doing the right thing  
Taking responsibility for our actions  
Building community

I would call these the core values of a just life. They are core values of the life of Jesus. The more I read about the economic decline and the threats to our society, the more convinced I am that God is giving us an opportunity to get our values straight. Sort of forced on us. Painful. But who wants to go back to the way it was? There is another way. It is called just living.

I don't always agree with Anna Quinlan in *Newsweek*. But this week she says it right. This is a great time to teach our children different values. Life is not about getting all we can. She even writes, "There is no salvation in things." If we learn that, and practice it, our lives will be richer and our world will be different. We will even begin to experience what I call the "beneath the surface" kind of peace that comes when you know you are doing the right thing, and when you realize that the values you are practicing are the values of the One who came to give us life in all its abundance.

The Psalmist says it so beautifully in Psalm 85.

*Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts. Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land. Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.*

"For a child has been born for us ... and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:2-7)