

What Kind of Peace?

Luke 2:8-20

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When the angels sang to the shepherds outside Bethlehem, they sang on two levels. In the highest heavens, there was glory—God’s joy and self-satisfaction that his purposes were being accomplished. And down here on earth, there was peace to humankind whom God has favored by becoming one of them. Many of our Christmas cards pick up that theme of “peace on earth,” and it remains the fondest wish not only of beauty queens but of prophets and poets and the victims of war. But what kind of peace is Luke talking about in his gospel? I think he’s drawing a contrast between two kinds of peace.

On the night that Jesus was born, as far as the Romans were concerned, there already *was* peace on earth. People called it the *Pax Augustana* or the *Pax Romana*. The Romans had this great dream—as many nations have had since them—that they would create peace on earth by uniting all the peoples of the earth under one government. Of course it would be run by the Romans, but only because they were the most enlightened. In Rome they erected altars for peace. Their coins were stamped with the words “peace” and “security.” For Jews even to this day the darkest day in history—even exceeding the Holocaust—was the day the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D. But for the Romans that was a form of peacemaking. The emperor Vespasian in 75 A.D. dedicated a temple of peace in Rome to celebrate the peace that had come in Middle East through the elimination of Jewish resistance.

Peace to Rome meant the subjugation of nations. Those who resisted were breaching the peace, and a common punishment for resistors was crucifixion. In that sense, the Romans could say that they made peace by the cross. Paul meant something very different when he said, perhaps with a little irony, that Christ made peace by the blood of the cross.

Rome made peace by using soldiers—not altogether different from the way we send armies around the world on “peacekeeping” missions. Rome at the time of Jesus had about 168,000 professional citizen soldiers, out of a much smaller population than nations have today. It’s estimated that 3% of Rome’s population was in the army. In addition there were about 10,000 guards stationed in Rome, plus a navy, plus the armies of the countries they subjugated, who were called—then as now—“allies.”

As we ourselves know, it is an expensive proposition to keep soldiers stationed in many countries. The Roman armies and forts were supported by taxes—not only on the Roman citizens but on the citizens of the nations they defeated and were allegedly “defending.” In some ways it makes more sense than the American model of paying for all the troops ourselves. Why not get the people you are supposedly helping to pay for the troops occupying their countries? For Rome, that was a primary reason for keeping the army in a country: to ensure that taxes were enforced.

And that is where the Christmas story starts for Luke—a couple of peasants from the northern settlements of the Jews forced by Rome to travel to the south, to Bethlehem, in order to be taxed. Modern translations like to say it was a census, but it is nothing like what we went through in the spring where heads were counted on the island. The King James Version was done closer to the time of kings and emperors, and they understood that the point of Augustus Caesar’s decree was “that all the world should be taxed.” The tax was to pay for the wonderful

peace Rome had brought by oppression. It seems impossible that the *Pax Romana* was not in the back of Luke's mind when he reported that the angels sang, "Peace on earth."

Luke and all the followers of Jesus meant something very different when they used the word "peace." While they wrote the New Testament in Greek, they were drawing on the Hebrew understanding of peace reflected in the word *shalom*. Roman *pax* was secured by weapons, but Hebrew *shalom* was a gift from God. And the word *shalom* has a much broader meaning than what we usually mean by peace in English. Only rarely in the Old Testament is peace contrasted with war. *Shalom* meant more than the absence of conflict; it meant something closer to life in all its fullness, well-being, being whole and complete, optimistic, flourishing, in right relationship with everyone. It's a big word, so broad in its scope that many rabbis would say "*Shalom* is a name for God." *Shalom* came to be used as a greeting—as it is today by some people—and as a blessing.

It was an important word for the prophets in the context of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple the first time, by the Babylonians. Jeremiah 29:11 (a verse some of you will know) says "I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for *shalom* and not for suffering." Peace like that was not something that could come through military might or alliances with foreign nations. It could only be given by God. It could only be brought about by the reign of God.

In Luke's gospel, peace is an important theme. In the run-up to the birth of Jesus, Luke records a prophecy by the father of John the Baptist, a priest named Zechariah. The last words of that prophecy, in Luke 1:79, say that the reason that the Messiah, "the dawn from on high," "will break upon us" is in order to "guide our feet into the way of *shalom*." A couple of paragraphs later we hear the angels singing "on earth, *shalom*." One of the most revealing passages comes in Luke 10, when Jesus is sending seventy disciples out into the villages. He tells them when they go into a house to say, "Peace to this house"—it's that phrase that Muslims use as an everyday greeting, *salaam al-lehem*. But that saying of *Shalom* by the disciples seems almost magical. It embodies what they are also told to say a few verses later—"the kingdom of God has come near you." They are announcing God's reign, the coming of the peace of God through God's reign as opposed to the peace of Rome coming through Caesar's reign. And, Jesus says, if the people of that house share that peace, that *shalom*, it will stay with them. But if they refuse it, that *shalom* blessing will come back to you; just take it to the next house and offer it to them. Not everyone wants peace. Certainly not all people want God to reign in their lives.

There is this connection in Jesus' teaching between the kingdom or reign of God and the coming of peace. The other forces that tend to reign in our lives make for conflict and even war. Jesus points out three false gods that want to take over our lives. The first is money, or Mammon; you can't live under the kingdom of money and have peace. The second is Rome or the violent exercise of power; you can't live by the sword and expect to have peace. Jesus calls us to love our enemies just as God does. The third false god is religion itself; if traditions and ritual and rules take over your life you can never have peace. Jesus came to set us free from that.

Do you remember the scene in Luke 19:(42) when Jesus sits on a hilltop overlooking Jerusalem and cries. He says, "If only you had recognized the things that make for peace," the things that make for *shalom*. But the people did not. They wanted either violent resistance to Rome, or complicity in Rome's violence against their own people. They wanted to find peace through wealth and religion. They did not care for the poor, for lepers, for the crippled and blind, for prisoners—the very things that would have made for *shalom*. They did not care about extending mercy and forgiveness and healing, but stood instead for the rigid enforcement of rules

based on externals. Thus they turned away the life Jesus offered, life in all its fullness, abundant life, the life of *shalom*. Rather than the peace he offered, they negotiated with the world their own solutions.

For Jesus, peace was not something that could be created politically. Perhaps a war could be ended that way, by force and diplomacy, but not *shalom*, not real life. That was a gift from God which could only be received in the kingdom of God—that is, when God ruled over your life.

In John 14:27 Jesus says, “My peace I give to you; not as the world gives—not as the *Pax Romana* gives peace—do I give peace to you.” My peace is different. Toward the end of that farewell speech, in John 16:33, Jesus says “I have said this to you that in me you may have peace (that you may enjoy *shalom*). In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” True peace does not mean that there will be no conflict. Jesus lived and died in conflict. True peace comes from the confidence that Christ has already overcome evil. The *shalom* he gives transcends our current earthly life, but it is always our prayer that his kingdom of peace will become real in this world as it already is in heaven. May we not be fooled by the peace the world offers, the peace enforced by soldiers. May we seek always that peace that can only come as the gift of God.