

Pastor Jim Lloyd

Date: December 24, 2023

Title: THE PEACE OF CHRISTMAS

Text: Matthew 1:18-25

Give me one word – one adjective – to describe this last month approaching Christmas. Got your word? What is it? I heard a variety of words. The one word noticeably absent was PEACEFUL. Did anyone use the word peaceful to describe your ascent to Christmas? BTW, where did these weeks go? Tomorrow is Christmas! Without a doubt these past weeks have been the busiest of the year. For several years now I've said to my wife – "Next year is going to be different." It was different alright – it was BUSIER! Some may have described their year as tumultuous [full of tumult or riotousness; marked by disturbance and uproar: raising a great clatter and commotion; disorderly or noisy: highly agitated, as the mind or emotions; distraught; turbulent]. That's not anywhere close to peaceful. Give me one word you'd like to use to describe 2024 come next December. PEACEFUL would definitely be near the top of my list.

Peace is a wonderful thing. Peace is more than the absence of conflict. It has been defined as the presence of great calm, prosperity, and good. Wherein I probably don't know all that it is, I know that my Christmases (here of late) have not really been that peaceful. I confess that I get anxious months before Christmas when I see the calendar filling up. Because I know that there will be a host of unscheduled events taking place in an already crowded calendar.

I recall a Christmas several years back when I did 3 funerals in the days surrounding Christmas. (I spent part of Christmas Day at the funeral home that year.) I doubt I'll ever forget the Christmas season when Diane's leg broke from a chondrosarcoma tumor. My immediate family – Diane, Jess & I – spent Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and New Year's Day at the hospital. Diane spent 21 days at the hospital. Then there was the week of Christmas 10 years later (12 years ago) when I came home from the hospital on New Year's Eve after having a soccer ball size cancerous mass removed. Life happens and it brings with it things that often interrupt our peace. Many of our church family – Jason, Lisa, Sue & Justin, and others had a recent Christmas that they'll soon not forget though they might have liked to. They were blind-sided with unimagined tragedy, and their lives were changed forever. Dare I say their world was shaken and their peace was challenged. A friend of mine passed earlier this month. He was at least 5 years younger than I. He was diagnosed with esophageal cancer on November 3rd and died on December 2nd. Life is often anything but peaceful. Terror sometimes invades the quiet. Yesterday I made a pastoral call, and the wife of the house is down to a mere 70 pounds. She hasn't been out of the house for some time. Her husband has given up his side hustles to care for his wife. Not only does he struggle to watch his wife suffer, but his wife is a prisoner in her own home. Her illness has taken a toll on their finances. I also had a call from the hospital switchboard asking that I make a call to the mental health floor. A lady told me that her 10-year-old adopted daughter was raped and murdered during a mission trip by the Taliban. She'll likely be spending Christmas behind locked doors with strangers. 7 years back around this time of year (Thursday, December 29), I went to Urgent Care to find out I had bronchitis. I left with 4 prescriptions in hand. Seriously, I was warned, the pill you take in the morning might make you mean. I took 2 the first morning. I asked my wife how I was doing. She said she couldn't tell the difference. Does that mean I'm mean all the time OR that I'm so nice that even mean pills don't work on me? Anyway, mean pills certainly don't promote peace. A few years back a Dutch fertility center made reference to a possible sperm mix up. Looks like 26 women may have the wrong baby daddy. The article noted that chaos ensued; peace was nowhere to be found.

God's Word exhorts us to pray for the peace of Jerusalem. Why do you think that is? Likely because of the absence of peace. Yet on Christmas night, as the shepherd boys were guarding their flocks, the birth of Jesus was announced by angels with the message, "*Peace on earth; good will toward men*" (Luke 2:14). This wasn't a new idea; many Old Testament prophecies, specifically those in the book of Isaiah, refer to Messiah's mission of bringing peace to our planet. Hear me – Jesus came to bring peace on earth, but in the 2000+ years since

His birth, it seems that peace has eluded us. Our nation battles wars and rumors of war. Our nation is at war with itself over the validity of battles that we are presently fighting. Fighting continues in hot spots around the world, and the threat of wars continues elsewhere. Dare I say it – our country, our planet doesn't know peace. However, even though peace hasn't yet come to pass on a political level or an international level, it can be experienced on a personal level. You can know God's peace in your life, regardless of all that is happening in the world around you. Though our nation is embroiled in conflict, YOU can experience peace. Though our economy struggles and remains uncertain, YOU can experience peace. Though there may be turmoil at the workplace or conflict in your home, YOU can experience peace... God's peace...Peace that Paul describes as *"peace which passes understanding."* In other words – a peace that doesn't really make sense.

I had an appointment at a medical lab a week or so ago. It was a medical exam to secure life insurance. (BTW, I was rejected.) The nurse took my blood pressure and said, "WOW!" I said, "WOW what?" She said, "Your blood pressure is incredibly good. In fact, you have the best blood pressure I've ever seen." Then she said, "You must be a very calm person." If she only knew. I told her my job was to make or keep people calm; this attempting to make people calm doesn't do much for keeping ME calm.

Illustration: I need a volunteer – someone who isn't quite as strong as me. Take this can and crush it. (Pastor gave the volunteer a can of soda.) Why couldn't you crush it? Because there is a pressure on the inside that supersedes the pressure on the outside. Now watch me – I'm going to give it a pressure on the outside that supersedes the pressure on the inside. Ta da! Maybe one day you'll be as strong as me. How could I crush that can so easily? You are right. The soda had been removed from the inside, so there was almost no pressure on the inside. Really – it's what's inside that makes the difference. *"Greater is He that is in us than he that is in the world."* We can't live in peace unless we have a relationship with the Christ who brings peace.

Obviously, I'm going to visit the Christmas story this Christmas Eve Sunday. Joseph was a man under pressure. The stress of his circumstances took his breath away and he felt as if he was about to be crushed. Any peace he had experienced suddenly vanished, at least for a time. His story is part of the Christmas story.

1. When life caves in (Matthew 1:18). *"This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit"* (vs. 18). Their wedding and marriage customs were different than ours. Couples were engaged through the arrangements made by their parents. Sometimes professional matchmakers were involved – sort of an ancient version of our modern Internet dating services. In that first century society, marriage was considered far too important to be left up to the young couple to decide. Parents made the decision for their children. Since engagements were sometimes made when the couple was still in childhood, the engagement could last for many years. During this time the boy and girl may have never met or seen one another. Next came the betrothal that sealed the deal. It was closer to what we call "engagement" today. If either party really wanted out, they were allowed to break the engagement, but if they became betrothed, they were legally bound to one another and referred to as "husband" and "wife" even though they did not live together. It's my understanding that once betrothed, the only way to break the relationship was a legal divorce. The actual marriage took place in a grand community ceremony with a reception that might last for as long as a week. It was only then that they lived together and sexually consummated their relationship. It was during the betrothal that Joseph heard that Mary was pregnant. We are never told how Joseph found out. Perhaps Mary told him. It may have even been street gossip that slipped out of Mary's home and eventually came to Joseph's ears. Joseph's life seemed to suddenly take a turn for the worse. I'll assure you that Joseph was not singing "The Most Wonderful Time of the Year." It seemed obvious what had happened. The things that he had been so sure of were sudden assumptions. He had assumed she loved him. He had assumed she was a virgin. He assumed that she was a completely different kind of woman than what he now thought her to be. Can you imagine the barrage of emotions? Disappointment and anger. He was hurt. He was humiliated. He was likely mad. He felt betrayed, but he still loved her and wanted her. In that little town of Nazareth everyone would soon know. Maybe everyone already knew. I assume there could have even been rumors as

to who the “other guy” was. Joseph must have wondered whether to put his fist through the wall or leave town and never show his face again. Just like that, gone were his dreams of the wedding and marriage to Mary. Gone were the thoughts of their living happily ever after. When caught by surprise, when crushed by circumstances, when deeply disappointed – it is hard to imagine that EVEN GOD could ever make life good again. Perhaps you’ve been where Joseph was. Maybe you’re there right now. Circumstances are crushing you. Sometimes life just caves in. We need a little peace.

2. Wanting to do the right thing (Matthew 1:19). Scripture says that Joseph was a good man. What makes for a good man? Let’s keep it simple. A good man wants to do the right thing. We’re not always like that. Sometimes the right thing isn’t our first choice. Sometimes we’d rather get even. Let’s practice the verse that speaks of an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth. We want revenge. But NOT Joseph. *“Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly”* (vs. 19). Joseph had concern and compassion for the woman he thought had betrayed him. From the information he had (in his mind), she was immoral, unfaithful, and guilty of a capital offense under Hebrew law. He could not have imagined ANY acceptable explanation for her pregnancy. Yet, he wanted to protect her from embarrassment, from harassment and from public disgrace. I can’t help but admire Joseph. He’s the kind of man most fathers would want for their daughter. The more common response would be to criticize and condemn his wife-to-be. You’ve heard those who have been wronged. You’ve read the divorce papers. You’ve been around those who have been hurt. Rarely is there a lot of love or compassion or generosity (Let me say it more accurately – Rarely is there ANY love or compassion or generosity) when one has been wronged. Get this – Joseph was not even a Christian at this point because there was not yet the Christ, but he certainly was “Christian” in his response to this difficulty, this disaster in his life. His priority was to do the right thing. No wonder God chose Joseph to raise His Son. In the event you haven’t made a resolution yet for 2024, here’s one – RESOLVE TO DO THE RIGHT THING! May we all be like Joseph. May you and I do the right thing when we are cheated, criticized, attacked, or betrayed. The world is full of people who are aggressive, defensive, self-centered, and sometimes see us as an enemy to be defeated. BLESSED are those who want to do what is right no matter how hard that may be.

3. Listening to the dreams of God (Matthew 1:20-23). There are at least 2 kinds of dreams – the GOOD ones and the BAD ones. I’ve had both. Can you believe it? I ALWAYS prefer the good. Joseph had pretty much made up his mind. He would initiate a divorce but do it privately and quietly. He would say nothing ill about Mary. He would carry the hurt in his heart but treat her with dignity and respect her whether she deserved it or not. Possibly in his mind he thought that this would free her to marry the father of her child. Joseph would carry his heartbreak alone. I wonder if he cried himself to sleep that night. I wonder if he sobbed quietly so no one else would hear or know. I wonder how long it took him to fall asleep. I wonder if he dreaded the morning light when he would tell her and then divorce her. When he finally fell asleep, Joseph dreamed... *“...an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins’”* (vs. 20-21). (That’s quite a dream. I haven’t had that one!) When he awakened, Joseph must have thought that to be the strangest dream he ever had. Perhaps he laughed at the way the human mind can rationalize almost anything if we want it badly enough. This dream was so far-fetched that he couldn’t help but wonder if it was really real. How could Joseph know he was the focal point of the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy of Isaiah? *“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’ – which means, ‘God with us’”* (vs. 22-23). I confess, I’m often skeptical of those who dream their messages from God. I’m prone to ask what they had for dinner the night before OR had they been smoking something. Yet, I know that God uses a variety of methods and messengers to communicate His truth. If Joseph had dialed my number the next morning and said, “Pastor Jim, should I believe this dream to be a message from God?”, I think I might have said, “Yes!” Not because of the dream and not because of the message, but because Joseph was a righteous man and wanted to do right. Joseph was not the kind of man

who chased after wacky visions. Rather he was a solid, steadfast, predictable and a godly man who really heard a message from God! That doesn't mean that God can't speak through a dream to wacky people, too. God calls those shots, but I do hold that not everyone who says they have heard from God HAS heard from God. What should we do when faced with such stress and turmoil, wanting direction from God? Pray. Read the Bible. Seek the counsel of a few wise and godly friends. And you trust God to get HIS message to you any way HE wants to communicate.

4. Waking up and deciding what to do (Matthew 1:24-25). When Joseph awakened the next morning, he faced one of the most important decisions of his life. *"When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife"* (vs. 24-25). That was not the easy way. It would have been far easier to get a divorce, forget about Mary and find another wife in town. To marry Mary probably meant living with rumors and whispers about their marriage for the rest of his life. It meant raising a child that he hadn't fathered. I suppose it even meant future years with a list of unanswered questions. Remember: Joseph was a RIGHTEOUS man. Obeying God and doing what is RIGHT was far more important to him than taking the easy path. He demonstrated something that millions of Christians have learned in every generation since Joseph woke up that next morning – that the RIGHT way is often the HARD way. Jesus said it years later: *"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it"* (Matthew 7:13-14). Too often we choose what is wrong and easy. If things don't work out well in short order, we assume that we made a terrible mistake. Let's learn from Joseph – do what is RIGHT whether it turns out easy or not. It was not only emotional strain and social pressure. (Here's the R-rated part.) For Joseph there was also sexual deprivation. I find it rather interesting that the Bible would mention this in the telling of the Christmas story. My initial opinion was that this is a very private and intimate detail that we shouldn't need to know. Our society has pretty much taught us that sexual satisfaction is virtually a human right. However, God's Word makes clear that sex was not designed to precede marriage or go outside marriage, but our culture seems to say to us – "If it feels good – go ahead. If there is a desire, no matter how illicit, it should be satisfied with little or no regard to the cost or consequence." Yet Joseph was willing to postpone a sexual relationship he had a right to exercise. He waited because he thought it was the right thing to do. He waited because he now believed Mary when she said she was a virgin. He waited so that there would be NO DOUBT that Jesus was miraculously conceived and born of a virgin as the prophet declared. Joseph put God's plan and Mary's and Jesus' reputation ahead of his personal desires. The more I learn of Joseph, the more I appreciate him. *"Joseph had no union with Mary until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus"* (Matthew 1:25). I could get stressed out just thinking about Joseph's situation. Engagement – betrayal – hurt – anger – strange dream – decisions – wedding – abstinence – baby, and... All of that PLUS happened in rather rapid sequence. It was enough to churn the soul and wreck the life of any man. Yet, I sense a settledness and peace about Joseph that I admire and desire. I want to know how he did it. Where did Joseph get his peace on the inside while he was swirled by a tornado on the outside? The answer is in the baby – the CHRIST CHILD. The coming of Jesus into his life settled his soul. God showed him the right way and he chose to follow. God's formula is the same for all of us – When life caves in, choose to do what is right, listen to the voice of God and when you wake up and actually decide what to do – DO WHAT GOD WANTS NO MATTER THE PRICE. It's then that you too will experience the peace that comes with Jesus. Let me end with an illustration I borrowed from the author and teacher Gordon MacDonald. Following a lecture Gordon gave, he was approached by a Nigerian woman who was a physician on the staff of a U.S. teaching hospital. She introduced herself with a familiar American name. Gordon asked her, "What's your African name?" She replied with several syllables that had an unfamiliar although musical sound to them. He asked her, "What does the name mean?" She explained that her name means, "Child who takes the anger away." Then she explained: "My parents had been forbidden by their parents to marry, but they loved each other so much that they defied the family wishes and married anyway. For several years they were ostracized from both their families. Then my mother became pregnant with me, and when my grandparents held me in their arms for the first time, the walls of hostility came down. I became

the one who swept the anger away. And that's the name my mother and father gave me." The same can be said about another name. JESUS is the child who settles the troubled heart. JESUS heals the tormented soul. He equalizes the pressure on the inside, so we don't implode from the outside. He brings the alienated together. He is the child who takes the anger away. HE is the ONE who brings peace. HIS name is JESUS. Isaiah 2:1-5 says: *"This is what Isaiah son of Amos saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem: ²In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. ³Many peoples will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.' The law will come out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. ⁴He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. ⁵Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord."* These verses teach us that God's plan for this planet is that we learn to live in peace with one another. Wherein it may be a while before we experience it on a global level, we can experience it on a personal level. To experience peace – we must LEARN TO WALK IN HIS PRESENCE. *"Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord."* To walk in the light of the Lord means to ACKNOWLEDGE HIS PRESENCE. Remember Joseph's dream – *"Immanuel – God with us."* When you wake up in the morning, God is there with you. Really before you awake, He is there with you. The first moment of the day. The first day of the week. The first day of the year. The sooner you acknowledge His presence each day, each year, the sooner you experience His peace. He is Emmanuel – GOD WITH US. Walking in God's light also means – PRACTICING OBEDIENCE. It is impossible to experience God's peace when your number one priority is sin. We must stop doing what does not please God. We must start or continue doing what does please God. Sometimes we want to have it both ways. We want God's peace, and we want to hang on to our favorite sins. We want God's peace, and we also want to gossip. We want God's peace, and we also want to get revenge. To experience God's peace, YOU HAVE TO MAKE A CHOICE. A resolution. Live YOUR way or HIS way. It can't be both. Peace only comes by following His way. LET GO OF CONFLICT. Isaiah says that God's ultimate plan for the nations is that... *"They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore."* Isaiah says that there will come a day when nations no longer train for war, because it won't be necessary to train for war – because no nation will be at risk of attack from another nation. Clearly, that's not the way it is today. But SOMEDAY, God says, things will be different. Someday, if I read this right, all the nations of the world will understand that conflict is a waste of time. Jesus' second coming will establish peace for us. I don't know when that will happen, but the same Good News spoken to the shepherds by angels is one of peace. Peace can reign in your heart TODAY. If God's ultimate plan is that nation will not take up sword against nation, it stands to reason that His plan for us as individuals is that we will not "take up sword" against one another... that we will let go of conflict and learn to live together in peace. As you read the writings of Paul in the New Testament, you hear this theme again and again. *"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father our Lord Jesus Christ"* (Romans 15:5-6). *"Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace"* (Ephesians 4:3). *"Live in peace with each other"* (1 Thessalonians 5:13). *"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone"* (Romans 12:18). God wants His people to live together in peace. He wants us to get along. We cannot experience His peace within our hearts as long as we're intent on stirring up conflict with others. So often interpersonal conflicts are about insignificant things. If we just LET IT GO, we'll feel a whole lot better, and so will everyone else. Paul said... *"Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you"* (Colossians 3:12). God called us to live together in peace. To experience His peace in your life, you must be willing to be an agent of His peace to the world around you.

Conclusion. In the days to come, God says, we will experience peace – world peace. Nations will live together in harmony and war will be a thing of the past. When this will happen, we don't know. Maybe sooner than

many think. In the meantime, God fills the world with peace one heart at a time. Those who learn to walk in His light, who become lifelong students of His ways, who let go of conflict and seek peace with others...they experience His peace in their lives – a peace that is NOT dependent upon political stability or a new or returning president, but on the presence of God in your life. He wants you to experience His peace today if you haven't already. Tomorrow and the days that follow – may we walk in peace. May we be instruments of peace.