

Pastor Don Nelson

Sermon: December 6, 2015
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“PEACE FOR US” ~ Matthew 1:18-25

- ☑ **Silent night! Holy night!**
all is calm, all is bright
‘round yon virgin mother and child,
holy infant so tender and mild,
sleep in heavenly peace,
sleep in heavenly peace.

Together, those lyrics and that tune create an almost tangible sense of serenity. For many of us, “Silent Night” is the musical essence of Christmas.

○ {Eph 2:17; Jn 14:27; Is 9:6} And with good reason! Jesus “**came and preached peace**” to all. To his followers he declares, “**Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.**” According to the Scriptures, he is the “**Prince of Peace.**”

‡ But is there any sense in singing “Silent Night” when our species is hell-bent on destroying itself? Yes!

‡ Does this carol have constructive meaning in a world wracked by terrorism and warfare? Yes!

‡ Is this song relevant in a land torn apart by political discord, social friction, and gun violence? Yes!

The value of “Silent Night” is not nullified by the lack of peace in the “real world” because Messiah’s earthly life was jarringly un-peaceful.

‡ Politicians greeted him with violence.

○ {Mt 2:6, 16} When Herod heard a new king has been born, he slaughtered every boy “**in Bethlehem and its vicinity...two years old and under.**”

Thirty-three years later the Roman governor of Judea signed off on Jesus’ crucifixion to protect his own power.

‡ Religious leaders met him with outrage.

All but a few vehemently opposed him. They grumbled against him, spread rumors about him, directly opposed him, and conspired to kill him.

‡ Most of the public rejected him.

Mary and Joseph’s family and friends assumed Jesus was a child of sin. Their judgmentalism helps to explain why the Holy Family remained in Bethlehem for up to two years instead of returning home.

Early on, the Savior’s neighbors tried to lynch him. Later, many of his “fans” quit when they began to grasp the cost of discipleship. In the end, it did not require much effort by the chief priests to stir up the crowd to shout, {Mk 15:13} “**Crucify him!**”

This does not change the truth that Christ Jesus *is* the “**Prince of Peace**”. Many of us can give personal witness to this. In him we are reconciled to God, our enemies, and even ourselves.

Nevertheless, his advent was anything but peaceful. It triggered intense discord and even bloodshed. No one knew this better than Joseph.

■ Please turn with me to Matthew 1:18: “**This is how the birth of Jesus Christ [comes] about: His mother Mary [is] pledged to be married to Joseph...**”

First century Jewish marriage is a three-step process. Step one is the engagement, which is negotiated well in advance by the parents or a

matchmaker. The bride and groom might be as young as 5 or 6 years old.

Step two is the betrothal. It begins with a solemn ceremony to confirm the engagement. At this event the girl has every right to break it off; but if she accepts the engagement, the betrothal is absolutely binding on her.

The betrothal lasts one year. It can be broken only if the groom divorces his bride. However, sexual intimacy is strictly forbidden, and the couple is never left alone together. A chaperone must always be present.

Step three is the marriage *per se*. It begins when the bride moves into her husband's home and the neighborhood gathers for a lavish celebration.

In our text Mary and Joseph are "**pledged to**" each other. I.e., they are betrothed. In the eyes of the law they are wed, but intimate contact is completely prohibited.

■ Continuing in verse 18: "**Mary [is] pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they [come] together, she [is] found to be pregnant...**"

The child in Mary's womb is the Prince of Peace, yet her pregnancy shatters the peace.

Put yourself in Joseph's shoes. Mary is your wife, but the two of you have never slept together. Now she tells you that she is "**with child**"?!

When you hear those words you are overcome with shock, disappointment, humiliation, and outrage. Your inner peace is smashed, your peace with Mary is blown apart, and your peace with God takes a huge blow ("Why have you allowed this to happen to me?").

You can imagine only two possible explanations for Mary's condition. Either she is the victim of a heinous

assault, or she is the perpetrator of a sin that violates your sacred trust.

■ Back to verse 18: Mary is "**found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.**"

It has to be this way.

Not that the ordinary means of conception is sinful! Our sexuality is a holy gift from our Creator.

However, the Prince of Peace must be both fully God and fully human to achieve his mission. Mary's humanity and the Spirit's divinity intersect to make Jesus the one and only God-Man.

I am speaking matter-of-factly. You are listening calmly. Familiarity and conviction have anesthetized us to how mind-blowing this statement is.

Not Joseph! This news is new to him. And while he does not doubt YHWH's power to perform such a miracle, he is equally certain this conception is not miraculous.

When Mary tells Joseph what has happened, it is not a gentle Hallmark moment. It tears him apart.

○ {Lev 20:10; Dt 22:23-24} The Law mandates that when consensual adultery is exposed "**the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death.**"

■ It is Joseph's legal right – some would insist it is his moral *obligation* – to have her executed. But that is not his heart toward her. Verse 19: "**Because [he is] a righteous man and [does] not want to expose her to public disgrace, he [has] in mind to divorce her quietly.**"

Isn't this interesting!? Joseph does not believe Mary's claims of innocence. In his perspective, he is the aggrieved party, and her sin against him is of the very worst kind. Not only are his feelings hurt; her adultery has the potential to severely damage his reputation and his eligibility for marriage'.

The Law *and* tradition authorize him to restore his honor and protect his future by punishing Mary. So would public opinion, if the community was aware. Joseph is fully empowered to stand on his rights.

Isn't that what most people would do? Defend their honor and protect their future above all else? Could this be one reason why peace is so elusive?

Joseph is not like most people. His intent is to balance the (apparently conflicting) demands of truth, purity, and kindness, even in the middle of his pain.

“He [has] in mind to divorce [Mary] quietly.”

Unlike a “raucous” divorce, in which a husband drags his wife’s name through the mud, a “quiet” dissolution will help preserve Mary’s dignity and make it possible for her to have some kind of future.

☆ Joseph does what he can to maximize the possibility of peace with God, self, and others –for himself and for Mary – despite the fact that many will interpret it as an unspoken admission of guilt. Joseph acts as a peacemaker at significant cost to himself.

■ Joseph’s commitment to peace-making makes it easier to obey when he is commanded to something even better. In verses 20-21 an angel “[appears] to him in a dream and [says], **“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.”

■ Verses 24-25: **“Joseph... did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.”**

“He [would] save his people from their sins.” Salvation includes forgiveness of guilt and release from death. Yet the heart of this deliverance is holistic peace in every kind of relationship.

✈ {Col 1:19-20} Salvation is centered in peace with God: **“For”** the Father **“was pleased... to reconcile to himself all things”** through his Son, **“by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”**

✈ {Php 4:7} Peace with God enables us to receive inner peace. Jesus says, **“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.”** **“And [this] peace... which transcends all understanding, will guard [our] hearts and [our] minds in Christ Jesus.”**

✈ {Eph 2:14-15} Peace with God equips us to make peace with others. **“For [Messiah] is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility ... His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace.”**

{Gal 3:28} Those words are specifically about Jews and Gentiles, but God’s objective is to reconcile

all humankind. **“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”**

In some respects Christ’s coming changed little. Many are alienated from God. Many lack peace of mind. The powerful oppress the weak, neighbor hates neighbor, and brother kills brother.

{Mt 22:37-39; Mic 6:8} But in other ways Christ’s coming changed everything. Some **“love the Lord... with all [our being],”** for we are his children! Some have inner peace, for Christ dwells in us! Some are seeking to **“Love [our] neighbor as [ourselves]”** as we learn **“to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with [our] God.”**

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