

Christmas Eve, 2009

Text: Luke 2:1-19

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What Kind of Peace is *This*?

His coming is good news. He is the prince of peace. He brings an end to bloodshed and war. With his advent, men can put up their swords. He bestows mercy, justice, and freedom. With him dawns a new order and a new age. A great, golden age. Golden rays of sunlight are sign and symbol of his reign. With him, the world begins anew. Deliverer. Victorious lord. Son of god. Savior.

Who am I talking about? ... Who...?

No! No. *That* was an ancient description of the *Emperor Augustus*. Augustus... The name means 'revered one.' *Son of god. Savior!* That's what crowds in the streets shouted as he passed.

This Caesar was revered for the peace he brought to the Roman Empire. A century of strife ended with his coming to power. And Rome was rebuilt, more glorious than ever before. From the rubble of combat rose temples, roads, arenas, public baths, library, forum, coliseum. Prosperity was carved into every marble pillar. Greatness paving every gilded step of the Roman way.

Now in those days of Emperor Augustus, a poor carpenter and his suspiciously pregnant fiancée slowly wend their way south. Treading wearily down from Nazareth, a backwater village of Galilee. They head toward Bethlehem, a dusty town just below Jerusalem. No road out here. No stone highway leads them up and down through the dark hilly wilds. No bright-armored legionnaire safeguards their steps on this perilous path. Mary and Joseph enter the city unheralded, unannounced, unnoticed. Just two more faceless names on a census roll. No marble palace awaits them. Not even a room. Just a stable.

And in that dimly lit cattle shelter, Mary mothers her firstborn. She cuts the cord; washes and nurses him. She wraps him up tight, and lays him in the safest place she can find—a stone basin stained with goat spit and cud—the manger. Just another baby, born to another poor family. No crowd in the street shouts *Son of God! Savior!* for him.

A child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

A helpless baby born nowhere important, sent to save the world?

Set against Emperor Augustus... Seems almost a joke. Maybe it is. Maybe it's God's little joke—poking fun at the great glory, and the revered 'peace' of Roman rule. Because that peace was kind of a sham, really. There *was* no war. There was no war, because Rome's political and military machine was vast, and *thorough*. Anyone who dared opposed it was brutally crushed. And all those bright beautiful

buildings... they were raised—stone upon stone—on the backs of slaves stolen from occupied lands. Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem to be registered. Augustus called for this census so he could tax the people of Syria. So he could take from them what small scraps remained to them after the occupation. After their lands and fields and livelihoods were stolen. Stolen to grow the wealth of Rome.

There *was* law and order. And with it, a ruthless suppression of human rights. Robbery and murder still happened, of course. But heck, if the victim wasn't Roman... well, that could be ignored.

The peace of Rome?—not peaceful if you're not Roman.

And what if you *are* Roman? What kind of peace do *you* enjoy?

Luxury. Leisure. Choices. Endless choices. Bath houses. Spas. Eateries. 5 fast food places on every city block. (Of course, their value menus had things like spiced larks' tongues and mackerel intestines... nasty, but probably healthier than a Big Mac). You have shops. Endless shops. If it's grown or made anywhere in the world, you can get it. Clothes, shoes, designer drinks. It's all around you. Instant gratification. And temples. Temples on every corner. To dozens of different "gods." Idols for whatever way of worship suits you. Just choose the god that works for you. Tons of entertainment.

Games at the coliseum. Horse races at the hippodrome. Diversions. Endless diversions.

...All sounds pretty good, right? Think you could find some peace in all that? ...Yeah, you bet!

Funny thing is, those Romans, they didn't. Not any real peace.

It seems, with that luxury and leisure came a deep emptiness of spirit. Everything grew superficial and trivial. The only meaning in their pleasure, was pleasure. And soon they started to become numb to it; needing more and more sensation to rouse their interest. The games at the coliseum were overtaken by gory gladiator battles. Folks needed the wild violent spectacle—bloodshed and murder—to shake them from their jaded apathy. People grew desperate to feel. To feel something, *anything*.

You can see it in the promiscuity and rampant sexual immorality of the times. You can see it in the gluttony of the times. People desperate to fill the void inside. With anything. Food, alcohol, opium.

Endless addictions. A greedy reaching for everything. Needing the next new latest thing. The biggest, the best thing. Endless consuming. Endless chasing after the superficial. The trivial.

You can see it in the whole culture. The things of deep meaning are left behind. Intellectual vitality gone feeble. Education at an all time low. The arts, philosophy and poetry...considered by just a handful of scholars... Academics no one cares about. Keeping great truths no one bothers to learn.

With luxury, leisure, endless choices, and greed... no one was satisfied. And with a god on every street corner. A god for home, hearth, horse cart and even shoelaces... the culture was spiritually dead.

No one had peace. For all the rich bright glory of Rome, the light of their spirits was fading,

And the people walked in darkness.

Does any of this world-weariness seem familiar to you? It's not a thing of the past, is it?

We know that void inside too. We have so many choices and diversions and instant gratifications today. We are equally accomplished consumers. Reaching for all kinds of things we think will make us happy. Status, money, and stuff—*tons of stuff*. We are equally addicted to entertainment and pleasure and things. Are *we* finding peace in them? Or does the same bleakness stalk us? Make us ache for some deeper meaning? For more connection? Do those shadows of emptiness and waste crowd *our* journey? Are we walking in darkness too?

Maybe we are. Maybe we feel some of that this Christmas. Maybe we'd like to know where to find some real peace.

To the shepherds in the fields the angel said,

I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth *peace*.

The angels said... *Here... Here is the peace you seek.*

In a world still dominated by pagan veneer and glitter... In all this wide world of places and things and stuff... Here... Here is peace. And it looks like nothing the world reveres. It looks tiny, dusty, vulnerable. It looks plain and inglorious. It looks like a baby in feeding trough.

What kind of peace *is this*?

What kind of peace is this?

It's the kind of peace no ruler, no army, no wealth, no power or pleasure of this world can give.

This is the peace of *God*. The peace of the God willing to shed all power and glory. For you...

The God willing to be born in a stinking old barn. To take on weak vulnerable human flesh.

To live this hard and often hurtful life. For you.

This is the peace of God. The God willing to suffer. For you. Willing to give everything to free his people from all the emptiness, and sin, and greed. The God willing to take the cross. For you.

This is the peace of God who comes to conquer death with compassion.

What kind of peace is this?

This is the peace God's limitless self-giving love. For you.

Knowing God loves you that much...*really* knowing it... that's the beginning of true peace.

And it begins tonight, for everyone here. Now tonight, we can walk out of this church.

We can walk right back into the world of distraction and things. And we can say, "well, there's my

Christmas duty done.” We can do that... But we *will not* know peace.

Or...instead... We can let tonight be our first step on the path of real peace.

If you haven't already, please, start looking toward a relationship with Jesus.

And if you have, keep going. Go deeper. Learn more. Get closer.

Let's start exploring the possibilities of real peace. Let's start opening our minds and our lives to Christ.

Let's start letting that little baby into our hearts. Because he will grow big and strong there. He will change our lives. He will fill our hearts with true peace.

Let's begin tonight.

Because the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.