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HOW TO BE A GARDEN

Matthew 11:28-29

We are into December, which means we are now well into the Christmas season. That is not news to anyone. We’ve been seeing Christmas themed commercials since the beginning of November. You see lights up on houses that weren’t there just a few weeks ago, lights that are about the celebration of Christmas. This holiday seriously impacts the normal patterns of life. In the years before the pandemic, and hopefully after it, schedules became crowded with holiday parties and school concerts. We all did way more shopping than we usually do. Good luck trying to get any business done the last half of December because our entire nation gets close to shutting down as everyone takes time off during the holidays. Hallmark becomes the most watched channel on television. Even sports nuts like me watch sappy Hallmark movies with their wives, which is unusual because there’s really only one Hallmark Christmas story. Oh, there’s tons of Hallmark movies, but they all have the same story. They change actors, names, places and a few details, but the story is always the same. You know how it’s going to turn out after you’ve seen a few minutes of it. Yet still we watch during the Christmas season, because Christmas changes everything. No other yearly event has impact that compares.

There is a larger message in that reality. It is that Christ, whose birth we celebrate at Christmas, changes things. The impact the holiday has on our lives is only a shadow of the impact that the birth of Christ and his subsequent life have had on all of history, and continue to have on individual lives today. Nothing and no one has had as much effect on life, on people, as the child that was born in a stable 2000 years ago. In the next few weeks as we approach Christmas I am going to pause in our study of the book of 1 John and do a brief series of sermons I call “The Most Wonderful” in which we will take a look at a few of the ideas that we hear repeated so often at the “Most Wonderful Time Of The Year,” ideas that are a result of the coming of Christ.

WE ALL LONG FOR PEACE.

Peace is the idea we focus on today. Peace appears a lot in Christmas cards and messages about Christmas. The phrase “peace on earth” shows up everywhere. Let’s begin our consideration of peace and Christmas by imagining the scene recounted in Luke 2:8-9. A group of Jewish shepherds are out in the fields near the town of Bethlehem watching over the sheep. There was nothing special about this night. The shepherds were doing what they did pretty much every night. This was just another night watching sheep exactly like hundreds of other nights. Some of them were probably awake and maybe some were sleeping as they rotated shifts guarding the sheep, watching for predators and bandits and sheep with a propensity for wandering away. Not only was there nothing special about this night, there was nothing special about these shepherds. They were just poor, unimportant, unnamed men trying to scrape out a living. So for sure, there was nothing special about this night…until there was. I have wondered how Luke got this story. It is possible, I suppose, that in his research he was able to track down one of these men and get the story from him. More likely he got the story from a member of Jesus’ family, for the events of that night surely became a part of family lore. It is not hard to envision the family recounting history and Mary or Joseph saying, “Remember what happened the night Jesus was born? What a surprise when those shepherds showed up anxious to see the baby and talking about seeing angels. Had it not been for all the other bizarre things that happened when Jesus was born I would have wondered what those guys were smoking. That was crazy.”

Those shepherds experienced something they surely remembered for the rest of their lives. They were scared out of their wits when a glowing being suddenly appeared to them in the dark. This being clearly was not a run of the mill human. For us to get the feeling of what this must have been like, envision a movie where some of the characters see a UFO, then encounter the UFO driver. Being confronted by ET would be a stunning event. I have known a couple of people who have seen what they believed to be a UFO. They recall the events vividly years after the fact. I remember once seeing some strange lights out over the ocean moving around in the sky at night in ways that sure did not look like an aircraft. I remember the kind of spooky feeling that created. Multiply that by a thousand and maybe you get a sense of what those shepherds experienced.

The being said to them, “Do not be afraid.” They were thinking, “Too late. That train left the station the moment you showed up, as did some of my bodily fluids.” It got even freakier. Soon this astounding being had company. Luke 2:13-14 says, “Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” How many is a great company? I don’t know, but it clearly was more than 5 or 6. I think a great company would involve hundreds at least. How many times has something like that happened in history? As far as I know, that night was it. That was the definition of unique, a once in history event. Which certainly means that great company of alien beings had a crucial message to deliver. What was the message? In part it was that the events of that night meant peace for people who have God’s favor. This startling and truly unprecedented event was about peace for people. Astoundingly it began with peace for a bunch of random, anonymous, unimportant farm workers.

Recently Laurie asked me what I want for Christmas. This is a question that differentiates children from old folks. Ask a kid what they want for Christmas and they will present you with a list. Ask me, and I usually say, “I don’t know. Let me think about it.” Does any kid have to think about what he or she wants for Christmas? Maybe Ralphie in the movie *A Christmas Story* when he goes totally blank after the Big Guy, Santa, asks him what he wants, but in real life, no. But I have to think about it, and having done so, I still don’t know. I believe that’s because I don’t play much. Kids can always come up with toys they want to play with. If you don’t play, you don’t need toys. When was the last time there was something you really wanted for Christmas? I think for me the last time was probably 20 years ago when I wanted some new hockey equipment. There is something you may not be putting this on your list, and you may not even be conscious of it, but there is something you want, a present you’d love to open, because all of us want it, and we want it a lot.

In his book, *Secrets In The Dark*, Frederick Buechner wrote that “a child on Christmas Eve…lives for the presents that he will open the next day, and in this sense we are all like children. There are so many presents still to be opened…and in a way it is our looking forward to the presents that keeps us going.” He says we keep hoping that one day a present “will turn out to be the one we have waited for so long, the one that will fill the empty place, which is the peace that passes understanding.” But one after another we open the presents to find that they don’t bring the peace we want so fervently, and after a while we begin to think that life “does not have that final present to give.” Later Buechner said, “Deep beneath the level of all other things we spend our time searching for, peace, real peace, is the treasure for which maybe we would all…be willing to trade every other treasure we have.” He claims peace is the treasure that we would give anything to have. But real peace is more rare than the most precious diamonds. It is so rare that, as Buechner said, generally we conclude life doesn’t offer it. But according to the angels Jesus came to bring peace. The prophet Isaiah had said 800 years earlier that the baby whose birth the angels announced that night would be the Prince of Peace. He is the one who brings peace. It is available to us, and it comes through Jesus.

JESUS CAME TO GIVE OUR SOULS REST

In Matthew 11:28-30 Jesus promised to give us rest. “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Rest is a beautiful picture. It is soothing to the soul, appealing to all our hearts. Laurie and I recently got to go out to La Quinta for 3 days. This has been a long and difficult year for all of us, and we haven’t gone anywhere. Life has been especially busy and stressful lately. Someone asked me given all the Covid restrictions, what we planned to do out in the desert. I said, “We are going to rest.” And we did. We spent a lot of time just relaxing and reading by the pool. It was wonderful. We needed it. If we don’t rest, we don’t recharge and refresh our bodies, our souls and our brains. We need rest. But **we do not rest if we are not at peace.** In promising us rest, Jesus is promising our souls will be at peace.

I have mentioned several times the incident of our bat encounter. Laurie and I went back to Minnesota for the wedding of a niece. We stayed in a restored 100 year old house in a very small town. That night I woke up in the middle of the night when I heard something in our room. I thought it might be a small animal running around the room. It was a small animal, but it wasn’t running. It was flying. It was a bat, and by the time I was conscious enough to identify it I realized it was orbiting over our bed. This led to near panic in the room. Laurie dove under the covers and said, “Get it out of here, Rick.” I thought that was a most reasonable request, but I had no idea how to do that. My only experience with bats was with the baseball variety, which are not nearly as unsettling as the flying ones, like the one we were sharing our bedroom with.

I opened the door to the bedroom and then sort of waved my arms in hopes that somehow it might frighten the creature enough to encourage it to use the exit. To my relief, after some of my histrionics the animal took the hint and left the room. I suspect it had more to do with not wanting to be in the same room as a deranged, arm waving idiot as it did with it being frightened. As soon as it exited the room, I closed the door with dispatch. I got back in bed. My question for you is this: how well do you think we slept after that? To the surprise of no one, we slept very little the rest of that night. We were not at peace. We were concerned that the bat might have been part of a family or a gang, and that we would have more visits from its colleagues. Because we were not at peace, we could not rest. That was a vivid, unforgettable reminder for me that when I’m not at peace, I don’t rest. Peace is the absolutely necessary pre-requisite for rest. In promising to give us rest Jesus was promising peace in our hearts.

Jesus promised this peace and rest to those who are weary and burdened. Who is in that category? Eventually it will be every human being. Mark Buchanan, a former pastor and a terrific writer, wrote a book titled *The Rest Of God*. His opening sentences were, “The world is not dying for another book. But it is dying for the rest of God.” He went on to say, “I am going to be bold enough to assume…that you are just plain tired, and often overwhelmed.” All of us feel the burden of life, and at some point we will feel that weariness of soul. We feel that because we lack the peace of God.

That was certainly the case with the people whom Jesus spoke to in Matthew 11. Those who were the somebodies, the important people, those with enough status and power to make life at least somewhat more palatable, the acceptable people, were not coming to Jesus for his wisdom. The crowds that came to him were common people, people for whom life was very hard. No one other than their own families noticed them or cared about them. They were insignificant in the world. Many of them were rejected and treated with contempt by their society. For all of them, their opinions, their dreams, their struggles mattered to no one but themselves. And life was hard. Their circumstances involved constant struggle and expenditure of huge daily effort just to survive, and there was no hope of that ever getting better.

As hard as that part of life was, there was another even more wearying aspect to life. They understood that what they most needed was to be connected to God, to gain his approval. That was where there was a big problem. In this foundational need, this highest priority, they knew they had no hope. The religious leaders lived their entire lives focused on the religious requirements of the Law of Moses. Those requirements as defined by the leaders were daunting.

One of the big rules of the old covenant was that one had to keep the Sabbath day holy. That was one of the Big 10. I don’t mean the Big 10 athletic conference, which consists of 14 colleges, not 10. You’d think college people would know how to count to 10. The ancient Israelis could count to 10, so their big 10, what we know as the Ten Commandments, was actually 10. Or maybe it wasn’t. The religious establishment, as religious people tend to do, felt it imperative that they spell out exactly what it meant to keep the Sabbath day holy. After all, that’s a pretty subjective rule. Who defines what it means to keep a day holy? Holy means separate, so maybe I define keeping it holy as watching football games all day rather than working. The religious folks said, “We define holy.” They started with a list of 39 things you must not do on the Sabbath day. No walking or running any great distance, no carrying things from one place to another outside your house, no sifting flour, no baking, no lighting a fire, no tying or untying a knot, no writing of two or more letters. Then the list expanded. No climbing trees, no swimming, no clapping your hands, no dancing on the Sabbath. You could pick up a child, but not if the child was holding a rock. You could pour cold water on warm water, but not warm water on cold water. I have no idea why.

That’s what they did with just one law. When you read about the sacrifices in the ancient law, and realize they did the same thing with those, you know there’s no way most people could keep track of all of it and comply. You can imagine how complicated it was to pay attention to and keep all those rules. The average Joseph was fighting a daily battle just to survive and take care of his family. There simply was no way he could follow all the rules. Most people just didn’t have the bandwidth for that.

They lived with the knowledge that the religious elite looked down on them, and they felt that God did the same. They could not measure up, and they knew they never would. So they lived with a great burden, and the whole thing wearied their souls. They did the best they could, but they knew it wasn’t enough, and never would be.

Jesus promised rest for the souls of those weary people. He said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.” The weary and the burdened were the poor in spirit. They were the people who knew they didn’t measure up, they couldn’t keep all the rules. Jesus told them the kingdom of God belongs to them, not to the high and mighty religious people who seemed to do everything right and who were proud of that fact.

This message was unexpected, even shocking, but he added something surprising. The way the weary and burdened people find rest and peace is, as verse 29 says, “Take my yoke upon you.” What is surprising is taking a yoke doesn’t seem to be a restful thing. A yoke is a symbol of work. You put a yoke on animals to get them to work pulling a plow or a wagon. It’s like Jesus is saying, “Find rest for your souls by going to work.” Why didn’t Jesus say, “I will give you rest. Take to my La-Z-Boy, for it is very comfortable.” At the end of the passage Jesus said, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Well, maybe so, but it’s still a yoke. It’s still a burden. It’s still work.

It will help us to note that Jesus added to his command to take his yoke, “and learn from me.” That suggests that whatever taking his yoke meant, it had something to do with learning. That proves to be a crucial clue to what Jesus was saying. The rabbis of that day often referred to their interpretation of the law and their teaching as a yoke. The idea was an animal might be harnessed to do useful work as his owner desired by taking the yoke. A disciple of a rabbi then would be harnessed to be what God wanted him to be by taking the rabbi’s yoke, his teaching of God’s truth. Jesus was using that kind of imagery here. To take his yoke is to accept his teaching. His yoke, in contrast to the rabbis of that day, was easy and the burden it places on us is light. It is not a long list of rules to follow and things to do. It is putting one’s faith in Jesus and knowing that by humbling oneself and trusting in Jesus one would be connected to God fully, completely, permanently. That is a much easier yoke.

We do not have a choice between a yoke and no yoke. Our choice is about which yoke to take. Everyone takes on a yoke. We all believe some teaching about how to find life, how to get what we most need in life, including how to be accepted and loved by God. Every human being has taken someone’s yoke.

IMPLICATIONS

Everybody is looking for peace, and there is no shortage of ideas people offer about how we get that peace. The problem is, there really is no peace in this world outside of what Jesus offers us. What the world generally offers us is a truce, a temporary pause in hostilities. We might get brief snatches of rest, and then the conflicts and the grind begin again. How does Jesus bring rest, peace for our souls?

WE HAVE PEACE WITH GOD

Every human has some powerful inner needs. We all need to be accepted by God and connected to him. We need to feel we are approved. We need to fell like we have worth and our lives have some kind of significance and meaning. Until we have those things we will never have peace and never rest. So we strive and struggle and are burdened. It all starts with God. We need him, we need his acceptance and love, he is the source of approval, worth and meaning.

Here’s an example of what I’m talking about. All of us want our lives to matter. The idea that they don’t matter, that they are pointless, absolutely destroys our souls. We can’t live that way. That is because we are made to matter. It is built into us and we cannot ever get away from the desire to matter. Recently our granddaughters were at our house. I was upstairs in my study working. Laurie was downstairs playing with the girls. Ella decided she wanted to do some coloring. So she came upstairs to her room at our house, sat down at her desk and began coloring. But as she began coloring, she said to me, “Yapaw, come watch me color.” I had no idea that coloring was a spectator sport. What difference did it make whether I was there to watch her or not? To her, it made a huge difference. Somehow, me being there validated what she did. It mattered because I was there to witness her coloring.

All of us, every single one of us, wants someone to watch us color. We think it is other people, but somehow no matter how much attention and approval we get from them, it is never enough. That’s because we want God to be watching and to approve of us. We will never be at peace until we know we have that. When we do have that, our souls can rest. They can be at peace. When we are at peace with him, we can be at peace with ourselves, and when we are at peace with ourselves we can be at peace with other people.

Romans 5:1 says, “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul explained in the first 4 chapters of Romans how we are justified, declared righteous by God, through faith in Christ. The normal human default is to think we can only be declared righteous by God through becoming good enough to deserve it. But Paul made the point that the fundamental and fatal flaw with that approach is that no one is good enough to deserve it. In fact, no one even gets close.

Deep down inside we know that’s true. We exert effort trying to prove that we do deserve it, but we all have that dark sense inside that we are just putting up a front. We are phony. We know we are flawed and far from perfect, we just don’t meet the standard. God has done this astounding thing for us. In Jesus Christ he met the standard for us. What we must do is believe it, trust it. That is why Jesus said his yoke is light. This is something we can do. We can trust it. Any other approach will end up being a burdensome load that will finally crush us and defeat us.

The obstacle between us and God has been removed by Jesus. Romans 3:21-22 says, “Now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.” By believing in Jesus, trusting in who he is and what he did when he lived, died and rose from the dead, we are declared righteous in God’s eyes. Paul concludes that this means we have peace with God. Until we have peace with God we will never have real peace, because all peace is founded on peace with him.

When my son was young he played a lot of hockey. I coached several of his hockey teams, which was a classic example of the blind leading the blind. However, I did know enough to help kids who were just beginning to play the sport. I remember one boy who wanted to be a valuable player on the team, but he had a problem. He could barely skate. On a couple of occasions he and his dad talked to me about how he could improve as a player. The boy wanted to work on having a better shot. I told him, “The most important thing you can do is work on skating. Everything in hockey depends on skating ability. Even your ability to make a good shot starts with skating. So what you need to do is skate every day. Spend as much time skating as you can. Push yourself to get better. Work on speed, turning, stability, skating backwards. Try to get as comfortable on skates as you would be running or walking. Work on getting to the place where you don’t even have to think about skating.” He didn’t like that advice. He didn’t take it. It wasn’t long before he gave up hockey.

Having peace with God is like skating ability in hockey. It is the foundation that makes everything else possible. If you don’t have peace with God, you won’t have peace anywhere else in your life. You won’t have peace with who you are, with the circumstances of your life, or with other people. But if you do have peace with God it forms a platform from which you can have peace in all areas of life.

C. S. Lewis wrote that a car is made to run on gas, and it won’t run on anything else. He said, “God designed humans to run on himself. There is no point asking God to make us happy in our own way…God cannot give us happiness and peace apart from himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.”

Unfortunately the lack of peace inside will produce lack of peace between people. For all the talk about peace, despite all the longing for it, have you noticed that the world is not getting more peaceful? There have been a couple of reminders courtesy of 2020. In the early days of this pandemic we saw lots of messages about how we are in this together and we all need to get through it together. How has that worked out? Not well. We are seriously divided and bickering. We aren’t together. There is no peace. The lack of peace inside us inevitably produces conflict and war between us.

This peace ultimately is the basis of peace even with other people. In an old Peanuts cartoon, fuss budget Lucy is in a foul mood and says, “I hate the whole world. I hate everybody.” Charlie Brown says, “I thought you have inner peace.” She answers, “I do have inner peace. But I also have outer obnoxiousness.” If we have real peace we won’t have outer obnoxiousness.

WE HAVE PEACE ABOUT LIFE

We will never be at rest if we are not at rest about what is happening in our lives. Not too long ago some circumstances caused me to think about the future. That night I woke up in the middle of the night, around 3 AM, and I couldn’t get back to sleep. I couldn’t rest. The reason was that I was thinking about the future. The problem is that there is a part of the future that I have no plan for. That seems foolish, and to be honest, it feels like a failure to me. Think about a football coach. How do they prepare for a game? They study their opponents with a microscope looking for weaknesses to be exploited, strengths to be avoided and tendencies. Then they create a game plan for how they will attack the other team. What they don’t do is say, “Well, we will cross that bridge when we come to it. I’m sure we will think of something on game day.”

As I lay there in the dark it felt to me as though that was kind of what I am doing. Don’t judge me. I had a plan. It wasn’t perfect. It might well not have been sufficient to meet the needs. But at least I had a chance. Then over the past couple of years my plan unraveled. Things totally outside of my control just blew my plan to pieces. I haven’t been able to come up with plan B yet. So I wasn’t at peace about the future, and because I wasn’t at peace, I wasn’t able to rest.

Unfortunately, life is not in our control. In fact, our control over the circumstances of life is mostly an illusion. I mentioned there are a couple of things we can learn from the events of this year. The second is that 2020 surely should have taught all of us that we don’t control much. As this year began, even as we heard about a runaway virus in a far off land, I never imagined what has happened. Not once in my life did I ever consider the possibility that we might be in a situation where our church could not meet to worship. I never thought about what it would be like to only be able to have virtual church. That was never a threat I had even a tiny bit of concern about. In the course of our leadership discussions at one point back in April Mark Kamps mentioned in an email to us the possibility of having to do church on line for the rest of the year. I remember thinking, “No way that’s going to happen.”

What else might be lurking out there that we don’t see coming? There could be any number of things. What that ought to tell us is that if our ability to be at peace is founded on our ability to control events in the future then we are going to be basket cases. Put us in straight jackets and lock us up in a padded room, because our control is an illusion.

Is it wrong to plan the future? No, that’s just being wise. But we need to not base our security and our peace in those plans. Laurie and I have seen an interesting pattern in our lives. We have made plans many times in our lives. We have to make plans in order to accomplish anything. But often our biggest plans get terminally disrupted. Our plan for the future is one more in a long line of plans that have ended up on the scrap heap. What I have to recall is that somehow the end of our plans has not meant the end of our lives. In fact, often the demise of our plans has been the necessary step to being amazed at how God has saved the day with his wise plan.

The fact that we have peace with God through Jesus means that we have a loving Father who is not surprised by anything that might be lurking in the future, a Father who never faces anything that is out of his control. In Matthew 10:29-31 Jesus said, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worthy more than many sparrows.” Don’t be afraid because your Father cares for you.

Isaiah 58:11 is a beautiful verse for us to remember. The New American Standard Version says, “The Lord will continually guide you; he will satisfy your desires in scorched places and will strengthen your bones. You will be like a watered garden, like a spring whose waters do not fail.” What do you envision when you picture a well watered garden? I picture lush foliage, lots of healthy, green plants, maybe a dazzling display of flowers sporting glorious, vivid colors. It is a soothing picture of flourishing life, beauty and peace. That is what God is working to make of our lives. What we need to do is believe it. Proverbs 23:18 says, “Surely there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off.”

This doesn’t mean God is working to make us healthy and wealthy. He is not striving to make all our dreams succeed and to make sure we are happy. He is striving to make us like Jesus, because that’s where life is most full. But the point is he is there, and he is working for our good.

Years ago Laurie and I had a memorable trip home from vacation when our red eye flight was canceled. The flight first was delayed. As the delay dragged on I had a sense of where this was heading. There was a restaurant opposite our gate that was still open that late at night. We went there so Laurie could get some coffee. Our waitress told us the week before the same flight had been delayed, then it was canceled and the passengers had to spend the night in the terminal. I was sure that was going to happen to us. So we staked out some spots where we could lie down and we got some blankets from the airline. Eventually they announced the flight was canceled. Now I was concerned about how we would get home. I was fretting about how we could sleep, and what would happen to our luggage and how we would get home. An interesting thing happened. The airline people introduced us to a woman whose job was to be airline concierge. It was to handle just such situations. She arranged hotel rooms for all the passengers and lined up buses to take us to the hotels. The airline took care of our luggage and somehow got us great seats on a flight home the middle of the next day. All we had to do was just do what the airline and their concierge told us, and they took care of everything. We just had to trust. There were people who didn’t trust. All they accomplished was they got tied up in knots and they created turmoil and conflict for others. It wasn’t ideal. It was inconvenient. But we had someone taking care of us and all we needed to do was trust them and do what they told us to do.

We are in that same situation with God. When life seems to be going sideways at best or even down hill, we need to remember he is with us and he cares for us. There will be things happen we wish would not occur, things that may be inconvenient, even unpleasant and uncomfortable, but he is there, he is at work, and what we need to do is trust and follow his lead. He will take care of it. And that means we can be at peace. To do anything else means we will create stress and fear for ourselves and cause conflict and turmoil with others.

If you find yourself distraught, stressed, fretful, worried, fearful, somewhere in your heart you are trying to found your peace with God or your peace with the world on your ability to make yourself acceptable to God or to plan and control your life. As long as you do that there will be no peace and no rest. But if you will believe in Jesus, truly trust in him, you will find rest for your soul. If your faith in Jesus does not create rest and peace, then it is not actually trusting in Jesus. So trust in him.