

December 4, 2016

## THE TV ISN'T ALL THAT SMART

Luke 2: 13-14

A couple of months ago Laurie and I saw the movie *Sully*. It recounts the story of Chesley Sullenberger. He was the pilot of USAirways flight 1549 out of LaGuardia in New York on January 15, 2009. As they climbed out they hit a flock of geese. It was bad news for the geese as a couple of them were swallowed by the jets engines. It was not so good for the jet either as the geese took out both engines. You know the story. Sully stayed remarkably calm, given that he was suddenly flying a jet with no engines and only 3000 feet of altitude. He quickly turned the plane around and made a perfect water landing in the Hudson River, saving the lives of everyone on board. The plane was only in the air for only 6 minutes.

Writer Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Blink*, tells of numerous accounts of people who experience an unusual effect of adrenaline during life and death emergency situations. Adrenaline causes their brains to work faster and their senses to heighten so that time seems to slow down. Things almost seem to happen in slow motion. With hyper focus they are able to deal with the situation calmly. This is commonly found in soldiers in combat or in police officers. I suspect Sully experienced that. Wouldn't it be cool if we could have that kind of calm as we go through life. Maybe we can have something akin to, something we will see in Luke 2:13-14.

## CHRIST'S COMING BRINGS US PEACE

We saw last week that the angel who first appeared to the shepherds announced the birth of the Messiah and said this was news of great joy. After that proclamation the angel was reinforced by a "great company" of angels, which means a whole bunch of them. I think it's safe to say we don't have a more specific description of how many there were because none of the shepherds was counting them. They were standing there in open mouthed astonishment. They were blown away when the first angel appeared, and now there is an army of them. When the shepherds told people about what they had seen I suspect people said, "How many were there?" They answered, "I don't know. But there was a bunch of them." I think we are fortunate that they were able to accurately report the message.

The angels praised God. I imagine they were dumbfounded over the fact that God would go to the extreme of the events of Christmas to rescue the human race, and in awe of his ability to make this plan happen. God was pulling off a feat that is beyond the ability of finite minds to comprehend. They said, "Glory to God in

highest heaven and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” The profound message there was that the birth of the child born that night in Bethlehem meant it would be possible for human beings to have God’s favor, his approval, and that those who have it will get peace.

It is surprising that this news was announced to shepherds. We are so used to this story that we think nothing of it. Shepherds are depicted somewhat favorably in the Bible. David was a shepherd and perhaps the greatest Psalm, the 23<sup>rd</sup>, is the Shepherd’s Psalm. Jesus called himself the good shepherd. However, in that culture they were not held in especially high regard. Their job was not very pleasant and sometimes difficult and even dangerous. They often were not the sharpest knives in the drawer, and maybe not the most cultured people. They were humble people, and the thought that God’s favor might rest on them, of all people, would have been almost revolutionary. Surely God’s favor was on the powerful, the influential, the religious and the rich. Why this news to shepherds? It implied that they, of all people, could have God’s favor, his approval and the peace that resulted from it.

The humble audience that received the news fits with the whole message and the work that baby would do when he grew up. But this morning I want to focus on the fact that Christ would make it possible for people, even an anonymous group of shepherds, to have peace. That is news so wonderful, so good it is almost impossible for us to believe it. That is because every person on the planet, every person who ever has been or ever will be on the planet, longs for peace.

Back in September National Public Radio reported on a study that was published this year. This study was about the effect of stress, which is a form of lack of peace. In the study they evaluated the subjects’ level of stress and studied the impact as they ate either a healthy diet or what is viewed as a bad diet high in saturated fats. The researchers observed some surprising results. Those who were stressed and ate healthy foods experienced the same physical effects in their bodies as those who ate the unhealthy foods. In other words, being stressed, lacking peace, is as bad or worse for us as eating a terrible diet. The *Harvard Business Review* has reported that between 60 and 90% of doctor’s office visits in our nation are for stress related problems. So at least the majority, if not most, medical problems are tied to a lack of peace.

Lack of peace is one of the fundamental problems of the human condition. In his book, *Secrets In The Dark*, Frederic Buechner said “part of the inner world of everyone is this sense of emptiness, unease, incompleteness.” He asserted that

everyone, every single human, lives with a background sense of angst. Eminent psychologist and professor Mihaly Csikszentmihaly puts that in other terms. He says “entropy is the natural state of consciousness.” In other words, there is disorder in there in all of us. In our more quiet moments we feel that disquiet, maybe a sense of vague anxiety, a sense of not measuring up, maybe a feeling of failure. It nags at it, and we long for relief, for peace.

I have noted before that we humans typically have a tendency to gravitate toward the negative. Complaint, criticism and division run rampant in groups of people. We give way more weight to the negative in our lives than the positive. Why is that? It is a function of the lack of peace in our souls.

Why is there so much conflict, upheaval, turmoil, even war among humans? Paul Tripp uses the example of a bottle of water. If you jostle it, what gets spilled out of it? Water. What will come out of it is what is inside. So if there is lack of peace inside, what is going to come out? Lack of peace. This impacts how we all relate to each other. I have used before the illustration of pool balls. When you start a game of pool you use a rack to pack all the balls in together. That triangle of balls is kind of a picture of peace and unity. All the balls are together and they are at rest. But then enter the cue ball. When you strike that ball with your cue stick you impart energy to it. Think of that being like a person not being at peace. What happens when that cue ball impacts that tranquil triangle of balls? They fly apart, bouncing off rails and caroming into each other. That depicts the effect just one person who has no peace has on a group of people. But now imagine that 16 people with cue sticks each simultaneously strikes one of the balls representing all the humans lacking peace. What would happen? Violent chaos. And that is the story of the human race.

Proverbs 14:30 says, “A heart at peace gives life to the body.” Being at peace at the very core of our souls is what brings life, and there really is no life without it. You are desperate for peace. Every person on the planet is desperate for it and in a mad search for it. It is a treasure that we would trade nearly anything to obtain. The angels so long ago claimed that we can have that peace, and it is found through the person that was born in Bethlehem that night.

### CHRIST GIVES PEACE WITH GOD

Notice that the angels said the birth of the Messiah meant glory to God and peace to those on whom his favor rests. Peace starts with having God’s favor. J. Oswald Sanders said, “Peace is not the absence of trouble, but the presence of God.”

Romans 15:33 and 13:20 as well as 1 Thessalonians 5:23 speak of God as the “God of peace.” When you read about the ancient mythological gods and goddesses some of them were known as the God of Thunder or the goddess of fertility. That meant they were the source of thunder or the source of fertility. So when we see God referred to as the God of peace it means he is the source of peace. He is where peace begins. He is the originator of peace, and ultimately all peace stems from him. What do you think is going to happen if we are cut off from the source of peace? We will have no peace.

I use an I Pad for my notes when I speak on Sundays. On Saturday night I always charge the tablet so it is at 100% when I get to church. The last thing I want is to be a quarter of the way into a sermon and have the computer die. I suspect that would make some people happy but it would be embarrassing for me. Last week when I got up to speak I was dismayed to notice that I was down to 40% power. How could that be? I got through with no problem, but I went away disturbed. How could the tablet have lost so much power? When I got home I discovered what the problem was. The night before I had plugged the charger into the computer, but failed to notice the charger had gotten unplugged from the wall socket. The computer was never plugged into the source of power so it ran out of power. If we are not plugged into the source of peace, what do you suppose will happen? We will quickly run out of peace. Our world does not generate peace, it drains it, just like the environment drains power out of my iPad.

If we are cut off from God then we are cut off from the source of peace. We try to manufacture peace, but that is about as effective as my Ipad being cut off from the source of power and trying to manufacture power on its own. It just won't work because it has no way to produce power. And we have no way to produce peace on our own. We do not have the capability. **We can only receive peace.** I repeat, we can only receive peace, not produce it. The closer and more open our connection to God, the source of all peace, the more peace will flow into us. The more distant we are from God the less peace we will have.

But that is where the problem occurs, for the natural state of all humans right now is to be separated from God. Earlier this year Laurie and I bought a new television. I was really excited about it because in addition to being bigger having a clearer picture than our previous TV it is also a “smart” TV. This means that it can actually connect to the Internet and access services there without having to go through some other device. I was excited when we got it home and tried to turn it on. Nothing happened. I found out I had to still plug it in myself. It is smart, but not smart enough to provide power all by itself. All right, now it had power, I

figured I would be blown away by how smart it was. However, I was disappointed. It turns out it's not as smart as I hoped it would be. I figured I would turn it on and watch it do its thing all by itself. It didn't work that way. I had to tell it where to find channels to show, and I had to tell it what wireless connection to find, and I had to give it a password to use to access the Internet. In other words, it's natural state, while potentially impressive, is to be disconnected from power as well as disconnected from the signals that actually make it useful. It needed some significant intervention to actually connect it. In its natural state it was useless.

That is the human problem. We like to think of ourselves as "smart" humans. New and improved versions. Unfortunately we may be smart, but like my TV we are not that smart. Out of the box we are disconnected from God. Since he is the source of peace we lack peace and are incapable of producing it on our own. If we are to have peace we must establish a connection with God. That is where it begins.

According to the message of the angels **the key to having God's peace is having his favor rest on us.** We might say we need to win his favor. In other words, we must gain his approval. This is something we are all familiar with. Laurie and I have been getting endless delight from watching the antics of our granddaughter, Ella, as she is growing and developing. She has recently learned how to clap her hands. It is impossibly cute when she gets a big grin on her face and starts clapping her hands. She likes to do it because she knows when she does it the adults around her will start clapping and enthusiastically saying, "Yay Ella." I reflected recently on how sad it is that when you grow up life isn't nearly so easy. All she has to do to gain the favor of adults is clap her hands. I can clap my hands all day long and no one seems to care. It gets me zero approval.

However, the larger point is that Ella is already catching on to the idea that there are some things you can do that will gain you favor. We go through life applying that lesson. So much of the time the effort to gain favor is behind nearly everything we do. We think the favor that will bring peace to our souls and enable us to rest is the favor of other people. Somehow we never get enough. That's because the favor of other people can never produce peace. People are not the source of peace. They can't produce it any more than you or I can, therefore they also can't give us peace. Trying to get peace by earning their approval is like drinking salt water. It makes us briefly feel good but in the end it just makes us even more thirsty. The approval that can bring peace is God's approval. Though people are often not conscious of this fact, **the most urgent, the most pressing question every human faces is, "How do I win God's favor?"**

If having any real peace is directly dependent on gaining God's favor then getting his favor is priority number 1. Even when we do not understand this is what we are doing every single human is pursuing God's approval. We may do it in some pretty warped or even absurd ways, we may do it unconsciously, but we all do it. A common approach to the problem is to do religious duties, or to perform good deeds, or to convince ourselves that we are doing the right thing. But these actually never produce peace. They don't work because they don't win God's favor, so we don't get connected to him and his peace doesn't flow. In fact our efforts produce the opposite of peace. They create uncertainty, stress, fear and exhaustion.

Why don't our efforts work to win God's favor? It is because what wins God's approval is righteousness, which has to do with being right inside or being totally good with not even a hint of evil tainting us. It means having "rightness." Sometimes you'll hear people say they just want to live by the Sermon on the Mount. That's a great idea. But, um, good luck with that. In that sermon Jesus explained what it means to have real "rightness," the kind that is necessary to win God's favor. He summed it up in Matthew 5:48, "Be perfect therefore, as your Heavenly Father is perfect." If the standard for winning God's favor is total perfection, then I am out of luck. And I am as good as the next guy. So if we can't gain God's favor that means none of us will ever find peace!

But there is good news. Enter the Messiah, Jesus, the child born in Bethlehem that night. The message of the angels is that the birth of Messiah had made it possible for imperfect humans to gain God's favor and as a result experience real peace. That's why he is called the Savior, for he has saved us from an awful and hopeless situation in which we could never find the peace we so long for. He did that by entering the world, living the perfect life that we never could have, then taking the punishment we earn by dying on the cross. Jesus, as a human, earned the approval that was impossible for us. Then he made an incredible offer to us. Put our faith in Jesus and God will view us as having the rightness Jesus has and thus having the same approval that Jesus does.

In Philippians 3:9 Paul says by faith he was, "found in him (Christ), not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith." Romans 3:22 describes it as, "righteousness...given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe." By believing in Jesus we are seen by God as having the rightness, the perfect rightness, that Jesus had. So we have the same favor, the same approval that Jesus has. This is why Romans 8:1 says, "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

No condemnation. Condemnation is the opposite of approval. God tells us we will have one or the other. Either God's favor is on us or he is condemning us because of our lack of rightness. But I don't deserve approval. I haven't earned it. In fact, I struggle because I don't see how God could approve of me. Here's how. God's approval of us isn't based on what we deserve, but on what Jesus deserves. Does he ever deserve condemnation? Absolutely not. Then neither do we, not at any moment of our lives. Even on our worst day God's favor is on us because of the rightness of Jesus.

God has done all the work. He has done the heavy lifting. Being a grandpa has been a new experience for me. But it reminds me of truths I learned as a dad. Little Ella is precious beyond my ability to express. She can stand on her own now, and even take a few tenuous steps. But she is still so very vulnerable and helpless. There are times when she will hold her arms up indicating she wants me to pick her up and hold her. I love it when she does that. I rejoice in getting to hold her. It occurred to me that God feels the same way about us. We are so spiritually helpless and vulnerable. He is thrilled when we simply turn to him and raise our arms, wanting him to pick us up and hold us. He doesn't scold us, he doesn't give us a list of conditions for being picked up or a list of rules to follow. He just picks us up and rejoices in holding us.

We have total peace with God. We are approved by him. We lose track of that peace by thinking the approval we need to be at peace is the approval and applause of other people. Peace never comes from the approval of other people. It only comes through God's approval.

#### CHRIST GIVES PEACE ABOUT LIFE

We all know that a huge disrupter of peace is fear, sometimes known as worry. It doesn't take us very long to learn that life can be dangerous and painful. There are so many threats that we can fear. What if I lose my job, what if something terrible happens to my child, what if this pain I am feeling is caused by a tumor and I have some hideous form of cancer? Those are big ones, but there are smaller ones that can eat at us as well. I am not a detail person and I am not a very organized person, so planning events is excruciating for me. Hanging over me is always the fear that it will be a complete disaster and people will hate me.

Most of us carry around a huge load of many and varied fears and worries. Sometimes we can't even identify what they are, and some people's lives are turned into utter misery by those fears. We all know that when we are afraid,

anxious, worried, stressed, we have no peace. The promise of the Angels was that even in the face of a daunting and often dangerous world we can have peace because of the coming of Messiah.

His coming does not mean that we need never fear any of those things happening to us. Unfortunately some of them will. Life mostly doesn't have a smooth landing. It ends in death for all of us, and often the process involves a lot of difficult things we worry about. But beyond that there will be a lot of hard things for all of us. Personally I have already been through the worst happening to a child, I've lost my job, and I've had events turn out to be disasters. So the peace God gives us through Messiah isn't the absence of any of those things, but peace in spite of them.

The Bible insists that because of Christ we can have peace even when life is in turmoil, even when the disasters strike. In fact one of the most powerful ways we give evidence that God is real is when we go through things that would utterly unravel most people and we are genuinely at peace. How does that happen? How does he give us peace? Matthew 1:23 says of Jesus, "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means God with us)." No matter what may happen, we won't go through it alone. Jesus Christ is with us. He will comfort us and give us the wisdom and strength to endure. I can attest personally to the fact that this is true, for Laurie and I have gone through some fiery ordeals and Our Lord Jesus did not abandon us.

He reminds us of two crucial truths. He has dealt with our greatest fear, which is death. Next to that terrible enemy everything else is child's play. He has solved that problem for us by guaranteeing our eternal future. Second he tells us he has a plan. There will be hard things in our lives, but God promises that they won't be too severe for us to bear according to 1 Corinthians 10:13. Second, somehow he will work some good out of everything that happens according to Romans 8:28. The story of Joseph reminds us that God has a wise plan that is working at all times. Joseph endured terrible pains and losses, but God used them to get him to just the place he needed to be.

## CONCLUSION

We can have peace in Christ. So what can we do to experience it?

## REMEMBER WHERE PEACE COMES FROM

One thing that eats away at peace is failure to remember that peace comes from having God's favor on us. We fall prey to the illusion that it comes from gaining favor with other people. So we strive for notice and approval, we become people pleasers and it eats us alive. We might also buy the lie that peace comes from



having enough money or enough success. I can cite numerous people who have more money, more success, more fame than I have ever dreamed of, who admit that it has not brought them peace. We sometimes think peace comes from having total safety from anything bad happening to us. That can never be the source because in that rare moment when all is good and you feel safe, you still have the threat that something is going to blow it all up, and that threat will obliterate peace.

In fact our efforts to control life and people to force it into some peaceful configuration actually are the cause of the destruction of peace in our souls. Real peace must be a thing that exists in the least peaceful situations. Life is going to subject us all to tumult. So peace cannot come from what is happening to us. It must exist in spite of all of it. So we must remember the source of peace is God. His peace flows regardless of what may be happening.

If you hear nothing else from this talk hear this. Peace comes from having God's favor on us. When we forget this truth and wander from it in search of peace somewhere else, all we do is drain peace out of our lives. But when we remember that peace comes from God, and his favor is given to us in Christ, we can experience his peace to a degree that exceeds human capability to comprehend.

#### KEEP PERSPECTIVE

One of the things that happen to us is we get uptight about so many things and lose track of what we have been given. Several years ago I saw a story on television about some young men who had grown up in the Sudan as orphans and were now here in America. One of them was living in Atlanta where he faced tremendous difficulties. He lives in poverty, he has nothing, he is trying to adapt to a strange new land with very foreign ways, he doesn't have family here to help him and he has no marketable skills or preparation for surviving in our economy. But they interviewed him after he had been here for a while. The first thing that was obvious was his faith in the Lord and his love for him. Second, when they asked him how he felt about his new home, his face lit up with a huge grin and he said, "This is like a second heaven." Most of us would be focused on what we don't have and on the seemingly insurmountable obstacles we face. All he could see was how good he had it. Perspective makes a huge difference.

#### LET THE PEACE OF CHRIST RULE

Colossians 3:15 says, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts." Paul goes on in that verse to say you were called to peace." We have the peace of Christ in us because we know God's favor is on us. It is on us because of Jesus' rightness, not

because of anything we do or don't do. We have peace because there is no condemnation for us. God is with us and for us.

So his peace is there. We can choose to let it rule. We can do that by giving up control of life. Our desperate attempts to control life so it goes the way we desire actually pushes the peace of Christ right out of us. So 1 Peter 5:7 says we should cast our anxiety on God because he cares for us. Philippians 4:6-7 tells us to let all our requests be known to God. Give them to him with thanksgiving, which means we entrust the outcome to him and thank him for whatever he chooses to do.

One suggestion is to memorize and frequently bring to mind that most familiar passage, Psalm 23:1-3. "The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing" (that's an Old Testament way of saying what God supplies is enough). He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters. He refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me."

Fear no evil. At this point in the chargers season I don't very engaged because I know this team is going to end up with a mediocre record at best. But early in the season when there was still hope they played a number of very tense games that came down to the last seconds. I recorded a couple of them to watch later. One of them I heard the final score. That really changed how I watched. Bad things would happen, bad calls against he chargers, a fumble, bad plays, and I would it's ok because I know they win. We fear no evil because we know the outcome. God brings good out of this.