

Dec. 20, 2009 Luke 2:8-14 “Can You Hear Me Now?” by Richard Boatman

⁸ That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. ⁹ Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord’s glory surrounded them. They were terrified, ¹⁰ but the angel reassured them. “Don’t be afraid!” he said. “I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. ¹¹ The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! ¹² And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.” ¹³ Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, ¹⁴ “Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those on whom his favor rests.”

When we read the Bible we realize a lot of stuff goes on behind the scenes. Angels and the plan of God and the Holy Spirit...light and darkness—there is movement of which we are often unaware. This movement is but a curtain or realm away. And periodically we get a glimpse that this spiritual activity is actually a part of the ebb-and-flow of our lives. The shepherds were just doing their thing, tending the sheep when “Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them...” Notice it doesn’t say the angel traveled a trillion miles to get to this pasture. No, he simply appeared. A little corner of the kingdom realm was pulled back, and suddenly the shepherds could see and hear what moments before they could not.

Can you hear me now? This simple question has been used as a marketing blitz for Verizon. Ironically, when my brother had Verizon over in western Iowa, he often had a very sporadic signal and would say, “Can you hear me now?”—and usually we could not. My mom recently purchased hearing aids. I’d been noticing she was having some difficulty with hearing conversation. Plus, her current pastor is a “soft talker,” so she finally got tested and made the plunge. She called me the other day with a story: There was an older gentleman who finally got a hearing aid. He said to his friend, “I got the best. It cost me \$4000 but it has been worth every penny.” His friend asked, “What kind is it?” The man responded, “Oh, it’s twenty till twelve.”

Scriptures teach that God’s Spirit communicates with us. Jesus would say, “Those with ears to hear, let them hear.” In Celtic Christianity the believers would speak of “thin places,” where the veil between this world and the Other world is *thin*, where the Other world seems nearer. Quakers speak of the inner light or inner guidance of Christ. But for many, it’s as though God is saying, “Can you hear Me now?” and yet they can’t. Their hearing of spiritual things is dulled.

Today's passage gives us a glimpse as to why that might be. When the angel invaded human time and space, the shepherds were terrified. The abnormal and the unknown make us afraid. Prior to the Fall or separation of humankind, spiritual things *were* the normal. It is testimony to how far reaching sin is that we have become so dulled to the things of God. And that which keeps us bound to our fallen condition...or that which keeps us from being sensitive to the realm of God is fear. The shepherds were terrified and immediately the angel said, "Don't be afraid."

We must **face the fear that dulls** us to spiritual things. 1 John 4:18 says that "fear has torment" or "involves punishment." Hebrews 2:15 tells us that Christ came to "deliver and completely set free those who through fear of death were held in bondage throughout the whole course of their lives." And Romans 8:15 says that Christians "have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again..." Fear dulls our awareness to the Holy Spirit and God's realm. Fear of rejection or failure or of God not showing up or of releasing those who have wounded us...fear of the past or present or future—all fear quenches the Spirit and inhibits God awareness. That's why fear, our greatest enemy, must be faced.

We cannot live in fear and **live in great joy** at the same time. Fear and joy are mutually exclusive. The angel said to the shepherds, "Don't be afraid...I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people." Great joy can only be known where fear is confronted, named and resisted. Joy is a force...rivers of the living water of Christ that flow out of our inner being. (John 7) But these rivers of joy will not share an inner sanctuary with fear.

While love initiates worship, joy is perhaps its greatest expression. Nehemiah said, "The joy of the Lord is our strength." Paul and Silas, while locked up in a jail in the town of Philippi, sang praises to God at the midnight hour. Paul would later write to the church he started in this same town: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"

Our lives are defined by worship and **the fruit of worship**. Everyone worships. It is built into our DNA. But our objects of worship differ. Worship is what we give our time, energy and resources to. When Larae and I saw golfers playing in the driving rain last summer I said, "Now that's worship." And worship bears fruit, good or bad. Verses 13 and 14 reveal to us the fruit of worshipping God:

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praising God and saying, ¹⁴ “Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those on whom his favor rests.”

In the past 5500 years there have been nearly 15,000 wars. There are currently over thirty large and small wars going in our world. (Rick Warren, *The Purpose of Christmas*) We humans don't do very well at living in peace with one another. And much of it comes from ignorance.

My brother recently sent me an email appropriate for post-storm Eldora. It read: Last year I replaced all the windows in my house with that expensive double-pane energy efficient kind. Today I got a call from the contractor who installed them. He was complaining that the work was completed a whole year ago and I still hadn't paid for them. *Hellooo! Just because I'm blonde doesn't mean I'm automatically stupid.* So, I told him just what his fast talking sales guy had told me last year, that in ONE YEAR these windows would pay for themselves! *Hellooo?! It's been a year!* I told him this and there was only silence at the other end of the line, so I finally just hung up. He never called back. I bet he felt really ignorant.

Much conflict is birthed by ignorance. But I don't simply mean a lack of educational prowess. As Rick Warren says, “An educated mind does not automatically produce a peaceful heart. What the world desperately needs is *reconciliation.*” In Hosea 4:6 God's prophet says, “My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge.” He's referring to an absence of hearing God's voice and of subsequent worship. The “**peace on earth**” of which the angel speaks is the peace of reconciliation with God. It is the fruit of a life realigned with God as its focus, the worship of God as its center.

Notice is says, “Peace on earth **to those on whom his favor rests.**” Remember, to be favored of God means God prepares our vessel for the impartation of the holy. Mary was favored. God stretches us and shapes us for himself. Peace and favor do not operate separate from reconciliation but are the profound expressions of union with God.

If we cannot hear God—*Can you hear me now?*—then we cannot effectively participate in a lasting peace, a peace that is the fruit of genuine heart worship. For peace *with* God through Christ leads to the peace *of* God; and the peace *of* God leads to peace *with* others. To be sure, the Spirit is speaking to us this season regarding peace *with* God, the peace *of* God, and peace *with* others. *Can you hear Me now?*