

Christmas Eve 2022



Luke 2:14 "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 among those whom he favors!'"

But alas, there is no peace on earth, even among those whom we think God favors. The Christian Cathedral in Cairo, for instance, part of the ancient Coptic Church, was bombed in the middle of a Sunday Service, killing 27 worshippers and wounding dozens of others. The Australian government stopped a planned Christmas Day bombing in their country. In Mali, a 2-year-old died, and three other children were injured when an extremist hurled a firebomb into their church. Fulani terrorists targeted a Christian village in Nigeria, killing forty-eight people and burning down their homes. Twenty people were gunned down by

security forces in the Congo. More than a million Christians have fled Iraq in the last many years because of violence and persecution, leaving only a fraction of their numbers behind in what was an important part of the early Church.

But it's not just Christians for whom there is no peace on earth. Protesters continue to take to the street in Iran after 22-year-old Masha Amini died while taken into custody by the morality police for showing too much of her hair under her hijab. 475 people have now been killed in those protests, and 18,000 have been arrested! And the government's response: public executions of the protesters! Meanwhile, civilians are freezing to death in the dark in the Ukraine, while Russian bombs turn their cities into rubble. Moreover, thousands and thousands of refugees from Southern and Central America huddle in the cold at our Mexican borders seeking escape from oppressive governments and failed economies. Homicide is now the leading cause of death for children in this country, as shootings in schools like at Uvalde or malls in Maryland or Virginia take their toll on our families. Even in the Holy Land, there is a never ending anger and violence. Since the beginning of this year alone, over 150 Palestinians and more than 20 Israelis have been killed, the highest numbers of fatalities in years. Indeed, in the last two weeks, six Palestinians – including two children – have been killed by Israeli security forces.

So, what exactly are we celebrating here tonight? For there is no peace on earth and goodwill among mankind. --- But there would be, if we followed the example of him whose birthday we honor tonight. There would be peace on earth, if we modeled our lives after his, if we learned to turn the other cheek, to really love our enemies, to treat our neighbors as we would wish ourselves to be treated. There would be peace on earth if we took care of the marginalized in our society, the sinners and tax-collectors of our day, and welcomed them into the wider arms of our communities. There would be peace on earth if we all worked harder to keep the vows we each made at our Baptism, if we respected the dignity of every human being, if we sought and served Christ in all persons, if we loved our neighbor as our self, if we strove for justice and peace among all people, and bore witness by word and example to the Good News of God in Christ. But alas there is no peace on earth, in far off lands, or even in our own. There is so much unrest and hostility in the world, in our own national politics, even in our own communities; as shootings, drugs, violence, poverty surround us here, though often unseen or unspoken of.

A Christian pastor in Roanoke, Virginia, was contacted by the local Department of Social Services asking if he would perform the funeral for a man who died with no family or friends. The pastor accepted, and afterwards became the executor

of his estate. So, the Pastor went to stop by the man's home as he prepared to settle his affairs, and he was simply heart-broken over what he found inside. What looked like a normal house from the street had a heartbreaking secret, conditions inside that were so filthy and such a ghastly mess, that the house after inspection was condemned by the local health authorities and completely torn down. No one should have been living there in those conditions. In the end, the Pastor simply couldn't believe that a man in his own neighborhood, within walking distance to his church, was living in such horrible circumstances. How could he not have known? Just the week before, his congregation, he said, sat in their warm, comfortable, cozy church building singing about the power of God, while this man was dying alone in squalor, in the shadow of their steeple. The shocking video of the Pastor's tour of the house went viral. Indeed, that power of God to change the world about which his congregation sang Sunday after Sunday, like we do here, that power is found in us. It is in our hands, and in our hearts, to do something about the violence and hatred in this world.

Alas, there will be no peace on earth, until we are able and willing to open up ourselves, and open up our lives to one and another, to the strangers in our midst, to the poor and homeless in our communities, to the refugees and aliens among

us, to the sick and suffering lying in the shadow of this church's steep, the least of these our brethren.

Tonight, around the world, more than two ½ billion Christians will be celebrating Christmas. The stories of Jesus' birth are the source of the world's most widely observed holiday. Almost half again as many Christians are celebrating Christmas this year as there are in the next largest religion, which is Islam. Indeed, more Christians celebrate this feast than any other, including Easter. Moreover, because of the cultural and commercial importance of this holiday in Western society and beyond, Christmas is observed by a huge number of non-Christians as well. Indeed, no other religious holiday in all the world is so widely commemorated by individuals who are outside of the religious tradition that originated it. So, what exactly are we all celebrating tonight? What are we doing here? Why have *you* come?

Are we all just here tonight to recall a beloved old story of a humble birth of a once great man, a story that inspires in us deep feelings and warm sensations, with its poetic images of a rugged stable, poor shepherd boys, angelic choirs, and exotic travelers from afar? Are we gathering here tonight only as some kind of literary society that comes back again and again to hear a favorite story --- like lovers of some Shakespearean play,

believing simply that this story still has something to teach us about our lives? Is that why we are here tonight?

Or perhaps we are here seeking to relive some fond remembrances of our own Christmases past --- cherished memories with family, with our favorite hymns and carols, with glimmering candlelight and whispered prayers, like some kind of antiquarian or historical society, like a group of religious re-enactors recreating and reliving important traditions for us and for our children, to be handed down generation after generation? Is *that* why we are here?

Or are we all here tonight not just to hear again the story of Jesus' birth among us long ago, but to further live out his story in our own lives, to find God here in the beauty of our worship, in the hearts of these faithful people gathered, and in the holiness of our care for one and another in this community? We are here tonight not to just remember this ancient religious event, but to begin to make real those promises of God, in our own lives, and in the life of the world around us, to begin to transform ourselves and our communities, to bring forth real peace on earth and goodwill among mankind? Let us all do more than simply hear again tonight the message of the angels. Let us all do more than simply relive again the story of Jesus' humble birth in Bethlehem. Let us all do more, to really see each other, to really love one another, to attend to the needs of

poor in His Name, and to bring forth true peace on earth and goodwill among mankind. Amen.