

Sleep in Heavenly Peace

By Harold L. Senkbeil

*Silent Night, Holy Night!
All is calm, all is bright
round yon virgin mother and child
Holy Infant, so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace.*

(Joseph Mohr, 1792-1848; tr John F. Young, 1820-85)

Will you catch it this year? That illusive feeling called "the Christmas spirit?" Usually it's brought on by healthy doses of the familiar trappings of the season: twinkling lights on Christmas trees, gaily wrapped packages, strains of familiar carols. These all bring on annual waves of nostalgia, weaving their magical web in heart and mind. For some, in view of the agony and suffering of mankind, all that seems inappropriate this year. It's not just the hardened Scrooges that are skeptical. You know the perennial complaint: "More than two thousand years have gone by, and still there is no 'peace on earth,' no 'good will among men.'"

Outwardly it would seem the cynics have it right. As Christmas 2004 rolls around, the world is still filled with wars and rumors of wars. Nation rises against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; still there are famines and earthquakes in various places. Still human hearts are fainting for fear of what is coming on the world. Terrorism, disease, and death rear their ugly head on every side.

In such a world, tinsel trees, mulled cider, and all the familiar cozy comforts of Christmas seem out of place. We're menaced by unseen threats from unknown assailants. How can we proclaim "Joy to the world, the Lord is come" when there's not much joy to be had? How can we sing "Silent Night, Holy Night" with our anxious world wrapped in encroaching darkness? How can anyone "sleep in heavenly peace" when it seems there's no peace to be had?

a different peace

Christians know a peace that surpasses all understanding. The peace of Him who said: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you." (John 14:27) Jesus Christ is our peace in the midst of an unsettled and very scary world. But His peace transcends ordinary peace. In fact, those whose hearts are anchored in Him rest securely in peace even while surrounded by chaos and uncertainty. Yet Christian peace is not a mind game; it's not purely an internal affair. The same paradoxical axiom applies as in other dimensions of the faith: the more external, the more internal. That is, the more objective the source and foundation, the more subjective its effect and result.

It's true. The more I look into my own feelings and heart for peace, the harder it is to find. On the other hand, when I look to Christ and His promises, then things are different. When I hear His Word, when I consider how He has baptized me into His death and resurrection, when I receive His sacrament and hear Him say: *for you, for the forgiveness of sins*, then I find solid footing in a slippery and chaotic world. Then there's a place for faith to stand and thrive and live again. But when I focus on my own feet, I begin to slip and slide.

That's also the way it is with the peace of God. Peace is not a do-it-yourself project; it can't be conjured up out of thin air. No wonder some consider such peace a pious fiction. It seems beyond their grasp because they've been going at it all wrong. In reality, the peace of God is not a human achievement, but God's. This peace is a done deal. It's the result of a unilateral treaty, signed, sealed and delivered by God Himself in the blood of Jesus Christ His Son.

the enemy is us

Ordinary peace is negotiated between feuding partisans, but not this peace; for we're all culprits in this conflict. The cosmic battle began not with God, but with us; you and I are rebels by nature. "The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God...." (Romans 8:7a)

Sadly, ever since the Fall, all mankind has been waging war against its Creator. Like our mother Eve, we've chosen to follow the delights of our own eyes and the inclinations of our own hearts rather than God's good and gracious will. Like our father Adam, we're all under the sentence of death because of our insolent pursuit of our own way rather than God's. His way leads to life; our way leads to destruction.

fitful frenzy

If there's any doubt about that, take an honest look at the unraveling world around you. Peel back the veneer of the images of success in our frenetic society and you find a vacuous emptiness. People live increasingly frenzied lives, caught up in an endless quest for more, bigger, and better. Ultimately, though, it's an empty quest. Even the biggest and best of material goods can't deliver the most basic of all human needs: love, quiet confidence, inner peace.

Many consider their frenzy just the price of admission to the kind of world we live in; an unfortunate by-product of life in the fast lane. Alexander Solzenitsyn labels it a sickness: "The characteristics of modernity, the psychological illness of (our age), is this hurriedness, hurrying, scurrying, this fitfulness—fitfulness and superficiality."¹

sin-sick souls

Rather than signs of achievement and marks of success, then, the stress and busy strains we all complain about are symptomatic of a sick soul. The symptoms may

¹ Quoted by Ian Hunter in his essay "The Last Prophet," *Touchstone* (Vol. 16, No. 6, July/August 2003), p. 20.

be different for each of us, but the recovery is the same. All of us find our health and healing in the infant Child once laid low in a manger, crucified on a cross, risen and now exalted in eternal glory.

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest,” said Jesus. “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matthew 11:28-29) Soul rest is just what the doctor ordered for the fitful, frenzied times in which we live. And souls do find their rest in Jesus. Not just in heaven, mind you, but also here and now.

God in disguise

That’s what Christmas is all about. Not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the payment for our sins. Christmas is the story of how God invaded this world to rescue and redeem His rebellious children. Leaving His throne in glory, the Son of God lowered Himself to descend among us. Coming in undercover, He disguised His divine majesty in lowly human flesh. “In Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,” St. Paul wrote. (Colossians 2:9) This is the central mystery of Christmas.

The shepherds were the first to hear of this mystery: “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:11) Every faithful Jew knew the divine Name by which God had disclosed Himself to their father Abraham. Out of reverence His holy Name never crossed their lips, however. Instead, they substituted “Adonai” – “Kyrios” in Greek, or “Lord” in English. Keeping this in mind, the familiar angelic message packs a stronger punch: the Good News of great joy was that the baby born in a barn was none other than God, the Lord.

No wonder the shepherds left their sheep; they wanted to check out this miracle for themselves: “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” (Luke 2:15) When they got there, they found the baby lying in a manger. Afterward, they related what they had been told concerning the child. “And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.” (Luke 2:17) What was so amazing about this message?

Was it the quaint setting, perhaps? The angelic chorus, the sheep or the animals of the stable? We who have grown calloused by years of experience with “the Christmas spirit” are perhaps ill-equipped to grasp the central wonder of Christmas, its sheer awe, the absolute marvel that lies at its core: – *unto you – a Savior – Christ, the Lord.*

All too often we lose the impact of the mystery imbedded in the angels’ praise: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace *among those with whom He is pleased.*” (Luke 2:14) It’s the gracious favor and mercy of God, you see, that brings peace. “Those with whom He is pleased” includes the whole suffering world,

including many who are too busy to notice. There is not one man, woman, or child left out of the plan of God to rescue and redeem mankind; it is His gracious pleasure to save them all. There is not one person left forsaken and unloved, not one sin that Jesus left unpaid. Peace is now established between God and all His rebellious children. His unilateral decree echoes in Jesus' dying cry: "It is finished!" (John 19:30)

peace on earth

Seen in this light, *Peace on earth* takes on a whole new meaning. The perennial quest for earthly peace continues unabated. Innocent victims still live in fear all the world around this Christmas. Terror still stalks the streets and lurks in human hearts around the globe, from Pittsburgh to Falujah. Human suffering, death and destruction loom large again this year, as they have every year since the angels' song rang through those Judean hills in the stillness of that quiet night.

But the peace they sang about is a different kind of peace. It's much more than the absence of temporal hostilities; it's the presence of eternal calm. Every human treaty is temporary, and earthly peace is all too fragile. Only God's peace lasts eternally, yet it's accessible here and now. In fact, it is the present possession of all who trust in Christ: "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 5:1)

getting a grip

But where do we grab hold of this peace, and how can we hang on to it when life is so chaotic? Serenity is in short supply these days. Like most people, we find ourselves hurrying through life, scurrying like most everyone else, just trying to keep a lid on things. If we're not careful, fitfulness and superficiality can engulf us just like it does a lot of others in these frenzied times. Three devotional habits build and maintain genuine peace and spiritual stability in the midst of turmoil:

- Look for God where He has promised to be found.
The shepherds followed the Word given them; they went to Bethlehem to see what had been made known to them. Not just any baby was the promised Savior, but the one "wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in manger." (Luke 2: 12)

You see, lasting peace is compromised when we look in the wrong places. The Scriptures are the swaddling cloths and manger in which we find the Lord who came to bring us peace. When we read and hear His Word, we come into contact with Jesus Himself – actually, He comes to us. "Christ is closer to you in His Word," Luther once wrote, "than your little son with his arms around your neck."

• Learn the art of meditation.

When heads are cluttered with fearful things, it's no wonder that hearts become afraid. A sure antidote to fear and distress is to fill not just our heads, but also our hearts with the promises of God in Christ. The practice of meditation involves exactly that: "I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways." (Psalm 119:15)

To "meditate" is not just cognitive concentration on God's Word. Study is vital, to be sure. But meditation involves much more. Essentially, it's rumination on the Word of God. It involves "chewing" the Word – orally, mentally, spiritually – repeating the words of Scripture out loud over and over until they take root in mind and heart, there to produce the fruits of God's Spirit through faith in His Son. And chief among the fruits of the Spirit are not merely love and joy, but also peace. (Galatians 5:22)

- Learn to pray God's Word back to Him
Our Father in heaven loves to hear from His children. Trusting in His promises, we bring all the fears and distress of our fitful lives to Him in prayer. We certainly may cast all our anxieties on Him, because we know He cares for us in Christ. (1 Peter 5:7)

There's no one "right" way to pray. But if we use meditation as a springboard for prayer, we can learn to use the Word of God itself as the warp and woof of our prayers, weaving our petitions into His promises. Every child learns to speak by listening to its parents. So also God's beloved children learn to speak as they are spoken to, echoing His Word back to Him, borrowing His words for their prayers.

praying God's Word

For instance, there's the wreath model for prayer Martin Luther recommended to his barber, Peter Beskendorf. In his own private devotion the Reformer used to begin with oral meditation on the Word of God. Then he would begin to pray, using that same Word of God as the foundation of His prayer first as instruction, then thanksgiving; then confession; and only then as petition:

"I divide each commandment into four parts, thereby fashioning a garland of four strands. That is, I think of each commandment as, first, instruction, which is really what it is intended to be, and consider what the Lord God demands of me so earnestly. Second, I turn it into a thanksgiving; third, a confession; and fourth, a prayer."²

²Luther, M. (1999, c1968). *Vol. 43: Luther's works, vol. 43 : Devotional Writings II* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (Vol. 43, Page 200). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

This model works well not just with the commandments, but with any text of Holy Scripture. Build your prayer around one Scripture selection, weaving a prayer of four strands all drawn from the same passage. You could use the following phrases to “prime the pump” for each of the four components:

“Here you teach me that...” (Instruction) Rephrase the Scripture in your own words, echoing back to God what He says *in this text*.

“I thank you (for this) because....” (Thanksgiving) Thank God for what He has promised or taught *in this text*.

“Please forgive me for....” (Confession) Ask God for forgiveness for how you have neglected or despised what He has promised or taught *in this text*.

“Please help me to....” (Petition) Ask God to give or produce in you what He promises, commands, or teaches *in this text*.

...in heavenly peace

Many find themselves so distracted by the busy bustle of the season that they find little or no peace at Christmas. Others look within themselves or to the nostalgic customs of the season to find some semblance of peace – and come up empty. Those who look to Christ and His Word, however, find confidence for time and eternity. Genuine Reformation spirituality is not a self-help project. Rather, peace of mind and heart are a byproduct nurtured in those who are justified by grace through faith.

When you cultivate the three habits of faith listed above you’ll find that the peace on earth the angels sang about is not of your own doing, but a gift of God. And it will continue long after the last decorations of the season are packed away.

Merry Christmas, then – and *peace* to you and yours in Christ!

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