

Angles on Angels, and on Genuine Christmas Peace

Colleagues,

First:

If you haven't signed on yet for next month's Crossings conference, consider doing so this week. Call it a Christmas gift to yourself, if that helps. The topic is pressing, as are the speakers I'll get to introduce as keynoter for the event. Because of their readiness to pitch in, we're able to offer that rarity of treats for you to learn from and enjoy, i.e. an inter-tribal Lutheran event that invites folks to step across the lines we commonly cluster behind and concentrate together on our shared theological vocation. The task, simply put, is to make the most of Christ and his benefits. The matter we'll explore is the daily challenge of living simultaneously in two worlds, the one established in creation, the other launched once and for all on Easter morning. In the one we live and die by Law. In the other we by die and live by faith in the Son of God, in whom we too are "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17). Nice, lovely words, yes, but how do they play out in the mundane doings of a Christian congregation, or in the enterprise of Christian education, say, or on the aggressively secular turf that most baptized people spend most of their time on? These are issues we all wrestle with, all the while seeking the guidance and presence of the Holy Spirit—yet how and where do we discern that Spirit?

So that's what we'll be talking about. Is it enough to whet the appetite? I hope so. I hope all the more that you'll be moved and able to join the conversation. January 24-27 at the Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows, Belleville, Illinois. For details, and to register if you haven't yet, see the [Crossings website](#).

Next, and to our topic today:

'Tis the season when too many pastors are still casting for angles on this year's bout of Christmas preaching. It erupts next week. Among the untold numbers whose Christmas habits include a trip to church will be at least a few who are wondering even now if they'll hear anything fresh emerging from the old familiar story this time around.

There's no reason they shouldn't, of course. Almighty God is Lord and Master of the Gift that keeps on giving, as all serious students of the Word discover sooner or later. Even the most tired of familiar texts—[Luke 2:1-20](#), say—will toss out new bits of wondrous joy when you take the time to rummage around in them, and all the more when you do so with an eye on the original Greek text and a few essential tools to help you track what you're seeing there.

So, for example, those shepherds weren't merely terrified when the Lord's glory blazed around them. No, "they feared a mega-fear," a rare and special agony that's promptly doused and replaced by the "mega-joy" of the angel's "good-newsing."

Or take that detail about the singing angels, which to most of us will have always seemed as little more than a cute, throwaway gloss on the real action in the story. To the contrary. With the least bit of digging and scraping it emerges as an essential piece of the night's good news, the very reason why that baby's birth turns mega-fear into mega-joy. Consider: suddenly, in the skies above, a teeming throng of the heavenly "host." To folks ensnared by modern English, that sounds redundant, "host" being heard as nothing more than a fancy alternative for "lots of 'em." It isn't. Or, rather it wasn't, not when King James's scholars penned their definitive translation, nor even two hundred years later, when Lord Byron wrote a poem, "The

Destruction of Sennecharib," that became a favorite in Victorian England. Here are the first two stanzas—

*The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.
Like the leaves of the forest when Summer is green,
That host with their banners at sunset were seen:
Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath blown,
That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.*

"Host," in other words, is "army." And so it is, wouldn't you know, in Luke's Greek text. His word is "stratios," which is nothing less or other than a military force. By it he points to the biggest threat by far that looms over the world and calls for "mega-fearing," and no, it isn't anything so trifling as ISIS, or guns rampant, or whatever else the fear-mongers are peddling this month in America. As the baby born this night will later put it, "Don't fear those who kill the body but can't kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28).

So here's the real story: over Bethlehem on Christmas night hovers unseen and unsuspected that greatest threat of all, the ultimate instrument of God's wrath as seen through the lens of first-century imagination. Really, choristers? Are you kidding? These are heavenly beings—let's leave it that; it doesn't say angels—arrayed for battle, "the sheen of their spears...like stars on the sea," massed in a multitude of companies, cohorts and divisions that Sennacharib could only dream of. And now—suddenly—the great astonishment, breaking loose in the sky at the very moment the baby's birth gets mentioned. It's the riotous tumult of a happy army, relieved and glad beyond imagining that the battle is off, the war canceled. Ergo their

song: “Glory to God in the highest—this God of grace and mercy, this specialist in all things impossible, who has found another way to solve the mess of sin that won’t involve us in the slaughter of sinners. As for you down there on earth, Peace, y’all. God *likes* you. Fancy that!” And, with that, the soldiers troop back to their barracks.

Mega-joy indeed where mega-fear once was, or ought to have been.

So how does a gem like this get conveyed to the micro-fearing folk who will gather in churches on Christmas Eve, 2015? For that I punt at this point to Ed Schroeder, who last week sent me some thoughts he shared with another friend in response to a Christmas letter. The topic here is “peace,” and whether and how we can speak credibly of that in a world that continues to choke its roads with tides of refugees, and shelter its poor in hovels, and embrace darkness as its fate.

God has better things by far in mind for sinners, not that we deserve them. Let’s use these days to get the word out. *Christus natus est*. “To us is born a Savior.... ” Alleluia!

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

“Peace on Earth. The One Realized—Made Really Real—at the First Christmas”

Dear _____,

You write that “The ongoing violence and suffering which we see in our country and in so many parts of the world show that the

'peace on earth' which Christ came to bring is far from realized."

Is that true? That peace on earth today is far from realized? Might it be at least partly realized, or even fully realized? That depends on which war you're thinking of. Which, in turn, raises the question of which war—yes, here, "on earth"—Christ came to end, replacing it with peace, and not at all a peace still "far from realized," but a peace 100% real, 100% realized.

Just as Pilate couldn't comprehend Jesus' kingship (John 18:33ff.) so we Christ-followers keep struggling with Christ's peace. If, as we think, he didn't bring it, or brought it only partially, then was he not a total flop? He said he was bringing peace. But if so, then peace in which war? To conflicts with and within the Roman empire? To Jewish internecine struggles? Hardly. These warrings were patently not fazed, not in the least ameliorated, by the time Jesus said "It is finished." But then why did Jesus say that? Might something indeed have been "finished," a done deal? If so, what?

The peace "Christ came to bring" was not peace on the battlefield of human vs. human conflict. His is not the sort of peace on earth that we regularly envision with our own Pilate-ish minds, namely the kind where people stop fighting with each other. Vicious though such fighting is, it is a only surface symptom of a more primal conflict, a cosmic war, between the Creator on the hand and the Creator's human creatures on the other. Christ's peace was and is a peace in that war, the one where all the earth's human inhabitants are on one side, allied and arrayed against their Creator, their petty warrings with each other notwithstanding.

Trouble is, lots of folks make light of this Global War. Some don't even know, let alone acknowledge, that they are involved

in it as active combatants in the armed forces of the human race. Still less do they realize that “The Force” they’re at war with is the very force that brought them into existence in the first place. So neither do they grasp the pickle we’re in. With that Force against us, you know who is going to win if armistice never comes.

Back to John’s Gospel we need to go, where Jesus makes it perfectly clear what war he’d ending. “*Not as the world envisions peace,*” he says, “*is the peace I give.*” Note the tense of the verb. He “gives. And if Christ *is* giving it, then it *is* real—and “realized.” Or if not he’s lying. Though according to John’s Gospel, how can he be? There the “father of lies” is patently identified as someone else—someone who is at war with Jesus, the truth-personified. So Jesus’ peace is peace finally arriving in the human vs. God conflict, not the human vs. human conflict. (Martin Luther’s Latin lingo for that is “*coram Deo*” as distinct from “*coram hominibus.*”) And that’s the conflict that needs attention first. If you never come to peace with God, you lose in the Big War, even when, in the little ones with human enemies, you might somehow come to peace.

Consider Jesus’ very own words: “In the world you will have tribulation.” Tribulation is non-peace. Tribulation is standard operating procedure in “the world,” as John uses that vocable. To undo that “tribulation” is *not* Jesus’ agenda. You can’t find a single place in all four gospels where he said anything like that. He has a much bigger fish to fry. He’s out to resolve the cosmic Ur-conflict. John’s Gospel tips us off to that already in chapter one: “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Reconciling God and sinners: that’s the warfare Jesus addresses—enmity toward God on the human side, rightful wrath of God on the other. Again, call it The Big War, the genuinely “world” war, worldlings at war with the world’s creator, and thus at war with the worldlings’ own creator too.

Pots in rebellion against their own potter (Jer. 18). To stick with that simile, you know who holds the hammer if peace never comes.

Or turn again in St. John to the great account of Christ's initial post-Easter appearances (John 20:19ff.). On two successive Sunday evenings Jesus says to the disciples, "Peace be with you." The phrase gets repeated three times in just those few verses. So peace on what battlefield? Surely not with the Romans or Jews on the other side of their locked doors. As the disciples clearly recognize, those guys are still out to get them. So what peace does Jesus bring? The peace that came through the body now marked with scars. And on what battlefield did those wounds make peace? Not the one where the fight is with the guys outside the locked doors.

Rather, it's peace in the primordial conflict that started with the first exodus, not from Egypt, but from Eden. That was the peace-agenda for Jesus. That's where his promised peace was indeed "realized." For those who trust him, that war is over. For those who do not, it continues. And warfare with God on the battlefield of the human heart comes to expression in warfare-with-weapons among us humans. That word for that again is "tribulation," which, he said, will continue among human kind. "You *will* have tribulation." It's the trademark of the fallen world—which Christ-trusters don't escape, even though they're now at peace in the Big War. That tribulation trademark will persist in the world for as long as wordlings who *don't* trust forgiveness persist. Even so, the great advantage Christ-trusters have amid persisting "tribulation" is that they no longer need to "fear" it. The "Fear not" message delivered way back when to the Bethlehem shepherds is a "Fear no longer" about the Big War, and a "fear no more" about the persisting "little" ones. That includes even the ones that directly threaten your lives.

"Though you die, yet shall you live." The Peacemaker in the Primal War said so.

Back to John 20. So the way to cope with that never-ceasing tribulation is what Jesus is telling the disciples about themselves. "Trusting the message" of my wounded hands and side, you *are* at peace with God. Now comes your calling—which is *not* first off to go out there and get people to stop fighting with each other. But "As the Father sent me, so I send you." Go for the jugular, for the root of the problem. It's the "God-problem," the stuff that shows up in Crossings text-analysis as Step 3, the deep-down level of diagnosis. Be peace-makers for folks still engaged in the Big War. Move people from being unforgiven sinners to being forgiven sinners. That's what the Big Peace is. And (says Jesus) I herewith authorize you for the task. "If you forgive the sins of any they *are* forgiven them." Their warfare with God is over. If you leave them 'stuck' in their sins, their God-warfare goes on, "their sins are retained." And prima facie evidence that their God-war persists is that their warfare with each other never ends.

So multiply sin-forgiveness. That's the agenda now handed on to you. "As the Father sent me, so I send you."

Back to that business about "peace on earth" in St. Luke's nativity narrative.

"Hark!" What are those "herald angels" [*editor*: that relieved and happy army] singing?

"Peace on earth and mercy mild.

God and sinners reconciled."

So "Fear not," says the angel, who delivers the grounds for this in the words that follow next. And the "Fear not" is not because

Herod's gonna now be a nice guy, and Pilate will be pleasant.

Instead, the Good Tidings of Great Joy are that a "Savior" is born in David's city to save not only shepherds but all the losers—losers in the God-war, that is. Notice now the marks, the signs, that distinguish him. "You will find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger," the latter being an enclosure of sorts. That sounds like the end of Luke's Gospel as well as the beginning. Jesus is wrapped and mangered at the beginning of the story; at the end he is wrapped and entombed. Because of this wrapping, especially the grand finale at the end, there is "God-peace on earth." It's available for everyone and de facto in place with those folks who trust God's "good will toward humankind," aka God's "mercy mild," enfleshed, enmangered, entombed, then ex-tombed. Alleluiah! God's peace on earth realized. It all began at Bethlehem.

Though it sounds ludicrous to worldly wisdom—the NT Greek word here is "skandalon"—the way to peace in human warfare is via human repentance in the God-war. That triggers peace with God.

The evangelist Mark sought to make that perfectly clear in his opening words: "This is the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ." He then quotes Jesus' first words, "Repent and believe the Good News." It starts with repentance, i e., surrender in the God-war. The peace-offer is part two, the Good News that Jesus *is*. So trust it.

That, says Mark, is the "beginning" of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Mark's Gospel notoriously ends with no ending. The oldest Greek manuscripts stop in the middle of the report of the empty tomb. Later manuscripts offer a few fill-in sentences to signal where it was all to end. "He said to them, 'Go into all the world and proclaim the Good News to the whole creation.' . . . and they went out and proclaimed the Good News everywhere."

That may sound like nonsense—to us too—as a “Work for Peace” proposal to get peace on earth “realized.” Yet that is the scandalous proposal that had its beginning at Bethlehem.

Cheers!

Ed Schroeder

December, 2015