

The Message of the Angels (Carols by Candlelight)

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Date: 16 December 2012

Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] Thank you.

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[12 : 29] Thank you.

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[51 : 29] Thank you.

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[53 : 59] And you, Thank you.

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[56 : 59] Thank you.

because we can't imagine something different to what we see.

We instinctively know what this world ought to be like. And it does exist, in a sense, at least in the potentiality of our minds and our hearts and our imaginations.

We long for that world. But if we're realists, we also know that the world is as it is.

And we can't pretend to ourselves that it's any different. And the basic perplexity of that is at the very heart of our human angst, isn't it?

[58 : 40] It's why we ask those questions. Why? Why is there such violence? Why is there such hatred, such war? Why is there a tragedy like that school across in Connecticut yesterday?

Why can't families live in peace? Why can't that poor child that has leukemia get better? Why can't your relative who has a brain tumor get better?

You see, the Bible won't let us play, let's pretend. Let's pretend that the world is all lovely and pain-free. It tells us the truth.

It tells us that the world is a mess. But it does explain to us why. Why it's in a mess. It points us not to a let's pretend solution, but it does point us to a real solution.

And we're in the mess we're in, according to the Bible, as human beings, because we are living in a long-standing civil war. We know what a tragedy civil war is, don't we?

[59 : 49] We've seen it in Afghanistan, in Iraq. We're seeing it unfold in Syria today. But the whole world is in a civil war.

A civil war with its maker. Because human beings have always rebelled unilaterally against God. They've tried to banish God from the world stage.

We've shut out the God of glory from our human world. That's what the Apostle Paul tells us plainly in chapter 1 of his letter to the Romans.

Although they knew God, he said, they did not honor him as God, but became futile in their thinking, and their futile hearts were darkened. That's what the Bible's diagnosis of our world is.

We shut God out. And he has turned his face away from us. God gave humans up, says Paul, to dishonorable passions and debased minds.

[60 : 52] And that means that we inherit a world that, in Paul's words, are filled with all manner of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. We're full of boastfulness.

People are inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Not much sentimental fantasy there, is there?

But what it describes is, I'm afraid, the disordered relationships of our world, our personal worlds, at a community level, and also at a global level.

That is the world we live in. And it all comes back to the root cause. And the root cause is a disordered relationship with God, our maker.

Now, human beings are responsible. Paul says there, we are without excuse. But God has done it. He has given the world over to the vanity and to the power of man.

[62 : 00] And therefore, we live in a world that we human beings have made for ourselves with our decisions and our choices. We've made a thoroughly good job at wrecking the world.

The problem is, we can't fix it, can we? Politicians can't fix it, that's for sure. The police and the courts can't fix it either. No amount of laws can sort it out.

Of course, laws can help to restrain evil. But no law on this planet can reverse evil in the human heart. Now, only an act of God can put this world to rights.

A divine intervention that will sort out that primary problem, which is a wrecked relationship with God himself. But in the coming of Jesus Christ into this world, precisely that is what has begun. And that is the extraordinary announcement that these heavenly messengers make to these terrified shepherds. The birth of Jesus, they say, is good news of great joy. It's wonderful news for all the people of this broken world.

[63 : 15] Quite amazing, really, isn't it? That an event that passed almost unnoticed on the earth, nevertheless, it set the whole of the heavens ablaze with song.

I think it's worth looking at this song of the angels, just for a few minutes, to ask what it is that this joy was all about that made these fearsome heavenly messengers sing and shout for joy.

First of all, what they proclaimed was real rejoicing in heaven. Above all, their message was glory to God in the highest.

What they're saying is that God has acted to bring himself right back into the center of the stage of the world forever, that he has given himself the preeminence in all things through what was happening.

You see, the Christian message is fundamentally all about God. It's about him being vindicated in the eyes of this world. It's about him being seen to be the God of glory that he truly is, but that we have blinded ourselves to.

[64 : 26] That's very, very important for you to understand if you're investigating Christianity. Christianity is not primarily about people. Christianity is not a crutch for feeble people who need something to believe in to help them get through life.

It's quite the reverse. It's all about God. It's about the true God, the only God. And it's about him showing himself to be the true God and the Lord of glory.

Showing himself to be that in a world that has rejected him and turned from him and which has been distanced from him because of human beings' rebellion. The message of Christmas is good news just because it is a message of God coming back into the center of our world.

It's good news because God is not leaving human beings in their disastrous story of their own making, but he's coming back to take charge of that story and to put it right.

It's ironic really, isn't it? Because Christ is so often airbrushed completely out of Christmas today. And sometimes Christians complain about that, but you know, the angels were not complaining about that.

[65 : 42] The angels did not come with a plea to the shepherd saying, please, please, wouldn't you think about putting Christ back into Christmas? Far from it. They're proclaiming the fact that God, through his action, has put himself right back into the middle of the human story.

And he's done it, even if no one else on this earth but these shepherds will see it or understand it.

And in doing so, these messengers say, he has glorified himself in the highest.

And all heaven sees it. All heaven is singing about this glorious happening. They sing because they already see what the birth of Jesus means for this world at last.

There's rejoicing, real rejoicing in heaven. And that's because through him, through Jesus Christ, and through him alone, there will be real reconciliation with the earth.

There is peace, says this heavenly warrior of angels, peace among those with whom God is pleased. Now, that's nothing to do with the sort of seasonal bonhomie of mince pies and mulled wine that we have at Christmas.

[67 : 02] Although, please do stay and enjoy mince pies and mulled wine afterwards. We're all for that too. But the real peace that these angels are speaking about follows only where God has his rightful place in this world and with its people as Lord over all the people of this earth.

But you see, for an estranged people, for people in revolt openly against God, that peace can only follow real reconciliation.

Real cessation of hostilities. You know how hard reconciliation can really be in the face of terrible crimes and injustices.

It's far, far from easy, isn't it? You simply can't airbrush out all the things that have happened. You can't just play, let's pretend, let's pretend I wasn't robbed by that violent criminal.

Let's pretend I wasn't raped or assaulted. Let's pretend my children weren't murdered in that massacre. Let's pretend I wasn't cheated on in my marriage. You can't just play, let's pretend and let's be reconciled.

[68 : 14] It doesn't work like that, does it? There's a huge, huge, huge cost if real reconciliation is to happen, even between human beings.

We know that. Anybody has ever had to forgive somebody, something major, something really big, you know how very, very deeply costly it is.

We know, don't we, that so often in our human world, the cost of reconciliation and forgiveness is just too big. And there never can be forgiveness.

One of the commonest things we hear, isn't it? I can forget, but I can never, ever forgive what that person has done to me. You see, God, our maker, God is the wrong party in every way in our world. And that means that he and only he, only he can bear the cost of forgiveness and reconciliation. And yet the angelic message is that he is the great reconciler.

[69 : 25] He comes as Savior. He comes to bring reconciliation. For unto you is born a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And that's what Jesus' birth means.

God said through the prophet Isaiah, I am the Lord, beside me there is no Savior. Only God can sort out this world's mess and bring salvation and reconciliation.

But now, do you see what these angels are saying? In the birth of this long-promised Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One, the King in David's line, in his birth, God himself has come to be the great Savior.

In the human flesh of Jesus Christ, he has come to make peace between God and man and to bring real reconciliation. Yes, it was at a cost, at a great and terrible cost, because justice can't just be ignored, because sin must be punished.

But he was born to bring peace through making peace. Paul says in another place, he made peace through the blood of his cross.

[70 : 45] God himself came in human flesh to bear the awful consequences of human sin. And he did it so that he might reconcile rebellious human beings to himself because of his great, great love.

No wonder the angels sing of joy. No wonder they sing of great glory. Even this marvel of what God is doing fills the heaven with great rejoicing.

Instead of God commanding the angels to come with their bright flaming swords and destroy, wipe out humankind. He tells them to come and say that he, God himself, is entering their world to reconcile those who were once his enemies.

What kind of God is this? Well, only the wonderful God of the Christian Bible is the true and the living God, the God who created the world and who so loved the world that he gave his only son that there might be real reconciliation, real forgiveness for rebellious human beings like you and me. And that's why the angelic message is not a message that can ever be ignored, not by the shepherds then or not by anyone ever, because it is such a vast, such a magnificent message.

[72 : 19] It is the great revelation of God, the greatest revelation there can ever be. And therefore to ignore it, it would be such a monumental refusal of reality that could only lead to total disaster.

There's real rejoicing in heaven because God the Savior has come. There's real reconciliation on earth through Jesus, costly, terrible, but wonderful because he has come.

And therefore, there must be real response, real response in time and in history for all to whom this message is given.

God sends his messengers of peace and asks for a response. There can't be peace, can there, for those who refuse the offer of peace. The offer of peace must be accepted.

It must be entered into. Reconciliation is something that must be grasped if it's to be real. We know that. There's no such thing, is there, as reconciliation in theory.

[73 : 34] Reconciliation means re-entering a relationship that's real, that's been restored, that's been renewed. Can't be any other way, can it?

And that's the way it is with God's peace. God is gracious and merciful, but he's not soft. He's not sentimental, nor is he unjust.

He offers his peace, but that peace must be received. It must be welcomed. The peace is for those with whom he is well pleased, say the angels.

Not because they're better people who have earned God's favor, but because they're humble people who are willing to receive his magnificent favor in Jesus Christ, who respond in obedient

faith to God's marvelous reconciling work in Christ.

See, the message of Christmas, the message of Jesus Christ, calls for a response, a personal response, an urgent response before it's too late.

[74 : 44] I said that the angels' words were prophetic, and they still are, because the peace that they speak of will one day fill this whole wide world, this whole earth, when one day he comes, and the people of Christ will inherit this earth.

One day Jesus Christ will return to reign, and he will establish then his cosmic peace throughout this whole world forever. But you see, on that day, on that day, he won't offer peace.

On that day, he will establish his peace by the force of his judgment. He shall judge the nation, says the prophet, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their shields into pruning hooks. That's another saying that's often sentimentalized, isn't it? Into sort of wistful hopes for a brotherhood of man throughout the earth. It is anything but, friends. That is a picture of abject surrender.

Surrender. Surrender before the power of Christ the King when he returns to judge this world. And that day is coming. But you see, on that day, on that day, it'll be too late.

[76 : 07] Too late to respond to the offer of the peace of God. It's like the end game of a siege with an armed gunman.

There's a time, isn't there, when the officer in charge offers peace. Peace to those who surrender, who throw down their arms, who give themselves up into the hands of the controlling authority. But then, in the end, there comes a time when the tear gas is sent in and the armed assault begins. And then there's no more time for peace.

The time for surrender peaceably has passed. And you see, friends, that is why Luke wrote this gospel for us. It is a message of rejoicing.

It's a message about real reconciliation. But it's also a message that demands a response. A response now before it's too late. Look at how the shepherds responded when they heard the news.

[77 : 12] Luke is saying, look at them and do as they did because they got it right. Do you see? They came personally. Let us go, they said. They were humble enough to know that this Savior promised was for them and they needed a Savior.

Many people think, well, I don't need any of that stuff. Well, if that's what you think, friends, you better be very, very sure, haven't you, that the Bible's totally wrong.

You better be very, very sure that Jesus Christ is a complete and utter fraud. Very sure. The shepherds came personally and they came urgently.

Do you see? They went with haste. There was no putting it off. That's another great, great stumbling block to us, isn't it? Oh, there's plenty of time, plenty of time for all that church stuff, all that Christianity.

Oh, I'm a bit older. Now, well, again, you'd better be very, very sure of how long you're going to live and what will be in your mind in the future, haven't you?

[78 : 21] When I worked as a medical doctor, I wrote many, many death certificates to people much younger than me and I'm much older now than I was then.

Friends, the Christian message is a message from God. It's a message from heaven itself to earth. It's a message of real rejoicing because it is good news, good news of real reconciliation that is offered between you and your heavenly Father, God in heaven.

That's why it's a message for receiving, not rejecting. When you do receive it, well, you also will discover, just as the shepherds did.

That everything, everything that you find out about Jesus Christ will be just as it has been told you by these angels. There's no fantasy.

There's no let's pretend with the God of the Bible. There's only truth. There's only reality. But there is great, great joy.

[79 : 35] joy. So I want to urge you, wherever you are, I want to urge you to join the joy of heaven this Christmas by responding to the message of peace in Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world.

Let's pray. I have any Father, how we praise and thank you that you came from the realm of glory to the filth and the squalor of a borrowed stable, that you might bear upon your shoulders the sin that parts us from you and win for us the gracious peace and reconciliation as promised for everyone, man, woman, boy and girl who will bow the knee to you and to receive you as Savior and Lord of

their life.

So Lord, may we join the joy of heaven and rejoice in a great Savior this Christmas. May our lives sing out glory to God in the highest and on earth peace with all with whom he is well pleased.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. So, come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant.

Come ye to Bethlehem. Come and behold him born, the King of angels. Come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord. what I fod ■■■ and God who will have■ or or a God who can...

[81 : 29] communicate Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

O God bless you so you who gave him Christ his Lord.

Do please stay for mulled wine and mince pies. You'll find that downstairs in the room on the left as you go down. We'd love for you to stay and enjoy refreshments. Also, if any of you would like to read more of that story we were looking at from Luke's Gospel, there are copies, little thin copies here of Luke's Gospel, and folks at the doors will have those.

[84 : 47] We'd love for you to take one. There's also a little booklet here called The Real Christmas, which is very short but a helpful little message just about what Christmas is really all about. We'd love to see you again at our Christmas service.

It's still to come next Sunday morning, our family Christmas service. Then on Christmas Eve here at 5 o'clock Monday for a shorter version of this carol by Candlelight.

And then, of course, on Christmas Day itself at 11 a.m. in the morning, a short service to rejoice and to celebrate Christmas Day. We'd love to see you again, and we do hope that you'll be able to join us.

If you'd like to find out more about what it is that I've been speaking about tonight, well, come back. We're at this every week, every single week of the year, explaining from the Bible this wonderful message of Jesus Christ.

We also have a course called Christianity Explored, which is just a short course for a number of weeks running during the week when we go through one of the Gospels, Mark's Gospel, and you have an opportunity to ask any question you like and to study for yourself the words of Jesus and the words and the works upon which the whole of the Christian faith is founded.

[86 : 00] What we believe is based on evidence and truth. If we're wrong about it, then everything falls to pieces. But if we're right about it, and you're not following Jesus, then everything in your life falls to pieces.

So it's something really deadly serious, isn't it, for each one of us to give our attention to. I'd love to think that everyone here would want to do that.

But as we stand, let's just pray as we close. Heavenly Father, we thank you for sending your Son to be the light of the world. May he shine his light into our hearts this Christmas and draw us forever out of darkness, out of the sphere of death and the fear of death, and into the kingdom of light, the kingdom of the Son of your love.

And to that end, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of his Holy Spirit be with you all.

Amen.