

A CLEAN, WELL-LIGHTED PLACE

(Read Luke 2:8-14)

Luke's account of the angels and the shepherds is one of the best-known passages in the Bible: we've heard it a hundred times--including last Christmas Eve.

People sometimes ask why the shepherds were terrified when they saw the angels.

But this was not at all uncommon.

Many times in the Bible people were terrified by the appearance of angels.

Zechariah, Joshua and Mary were all terrified when an angel appeared to them.

This may come as a surprise because angels are typically depicted in stories and paintings as cute and adorable little things.

Remember Clarence in *"It's a Wonderful Life"*--a sweet little old man who was actually a new angel who had been sent back from heaven to earn his wings by doing a good deed?

Then there are those chubby-cheeked little cherubs we see on Christmas cards and tea cups.

But that doesn't square with the way the Bible describes angels.

The Bible describes them as scary looking creatures.

The words "cherub" and "cherubic" may bring to mind rosy-cheeked little cupids but the cherubim Isaiah saw were grotesque—at least by human standards.

The ones who appeared to Ezekiel had three pairs of wings which were covered in front and in back with eyes.

Angels are supernatural warriors who are engaged in warfare with the legions of Satan.

When the Bible refers to the "heavenly host," the word "host" means "armies."

In the Book of Joshua, Jesus appears as the commander-in-chief of those armies who gives Joshua the battle plan for the conquest of Jericho.

Listen to the way this warfare is described in the Book of Revelation: [read *Rev. 19:11-21*]

This is not the kind of thing one finds in nursery rhymes.

So it's no wonder the shepherds when a battalion of these angels appeared to them outside Bethlehem.

They had come to proclaim that the Commander-in-chief of the armies of heaven had arrived in the world.

He had come to defeat the demonic legions of Satan and the angels had come to announce the peace that would follow his victory.

Now there's a big difference between the peace that comes to a victorious army and the peace that comes to a defeated army.

Peace came to Japan at the end of WW2, but it was a very different peace than the peace that came to America.

The peace that came to Japan was a peace of shame and defeat; the peace that came to America was a peace of victory and celebration.

And the peace that the angels came to proclaim was a victor's peace.

Jesus did not subscribe to the Neville Chamberlain philosophy of "peace at any price": He didn't believe in avoiding wars, he believed in winning them.

War has always been something to dread, but ever since the '60's it has been something to be avoided at all cost.

Occasionally one still sees a bumper sticker that says, "War Never Solved Anything."

But I once saw another bumper sticker that said, "War Never Solved Anything—except ending Slavery and the holocaust.

The sad fact is that there are times when war is necessary.

And the war that Jesus would win on the cross was a divine and a human necessity.

It was not won cheaply.

It came at superhuman cost--by the spilling of divine blood.

But it brought peace between man and God—peace that fills the human heart and will last eternally.

So how do we get it this peace? And how does it change us when we do?

Listen to the words that Jesus spoke to his disciples on the night before he was crucified: *“If anyone loves me, he will keep my word. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not keep my word. These words that you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me....Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”*

“If anyone loves me he will keep my word.”

The source of the peace that Jesus brings lies in the words that Jesus spoke.

Jesus refers to this on several occasions.

“...everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.”

“If you continue in my word you are truly my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

All of God’s blessings—including peace—begin and end with the word of God—the Word made flesh and the words of the Holy Scriptures.

When we fill our lives with God’s word and allow it to do its work in us, it strengthens our faith and fills us with peace.

That is Jesus’ promise.

As he prayed for his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane: *“Father...sanctify them by the truth: thy word is truth.”*

That is how we acquire the peace that passes understanding.

But what form does this peace take?

What does it feel like?

It’s probably a little different for each person who experiences it because God deals with each one of us in an intensely personal way.

But a strong hint is given by Paul in *Philippians* when he says, *“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say it: Rejoice! Let your forbearing spirit be evident to all, the Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”*

This passage tells us a few things about the peace we receive.

First of all it's a tangible peace, a peace that we experience in our hearts and souls.

It's a peace that replaces anxiety.

And we all know about anxiety, don't we?

Anxiety is one of the biggest problems we have.

C. S. Lewis said that even when we are able to handle the problems that immediately face us we still worry about potential future problems—problems which take the form of “what ifs?”

And “what-ifs” can come to dominate our thinking.

“What if I lose my job?”

“What if I were to get sick and be unable to work? What would we do for money?”

“What'll happen to this country if (blank) gets elected?”

“What if I die? How would my wife manage financially?”

“What if my kids get mixed up with the wrong group at school?”

“What if I get Covid?”

It's not so much today's problems that weigh on our mind as it is tomorrow's “what ifs?”

There's a name for this: it's called anxiety.

I like the German word for it: “angst.”

We take a load of it on when we start imagining the bad things that **could** lie ahead.

But do you know what anxiety really is?

It's nothing.

That's right, anxiety is nothing at all.

It's the absence of something called faith.

Anxiety is *unbelief in the inmost heart*.

It's the darkness that threatens to come in when the light of faith grows dim.

The author Ernest Hemingway suffered from anxiety all his life.

He wrote a short story about it entitled “A Clean, Well- Lighted Place.”

The story is set in a café in Barcelona and concerns an old man who comes into the café every evening and sits at a table sipping a glass of wine until the café closes and he has to leave and go back to his apartment.

Two waiters are having a conversation about the man, and one waiter asks the other why the man doesn't seem to want to go home.

The other waiter replies: "He's afraid."

"Afraid of what?" asks the first waiter.

"Of nada," the other waiter replies.

"Nada" is Spanish for "nothing."

"Nada" didn't refer to the absence of something; "nada" referred to the presence of something—a darkness that the old man feared would devour him.

So every night he come to to a clean well-lighted place where he could hide from the darkness.

Spiritually speaking, darkness *is* the presence of something.

Something terrible.

In Milton's epic poem, "Paradise Lost," when Satan is cast out of heaven into hell he radiates what Milton calls: "darkness visible."

Darkness visible is unbelief.

And unbelief is not merely the lack of belief, it is doubt that radiates from Satan.

A thorn in the flesh of every believer.

And there are times that we all suffer from it.

It's the terrible nagging fear that even though Jesus has helped us again and again in the past, he may not help us "this time."

It's what the man with the demon-possessed child said when he asked Jesus if He could heal his child and Jesus asked him if he believed that he could.

He said, "I believe, Lord; help me with my unbelief."

Does that sound familiar?

In essence, it's the fear that after all is said and done, we live in a random, uncaring, Godless universe, and that things are probably going to go from bad to worse.

There is only one thing that will overcome that fear, the devil-spawned unbelief that troubles our souls from time to time.

Only one thing that will banish it and fill the hole in our soul it creates.

Faith in the loving God who created us, who saved us, who knows us inside and out and who loves us with an everlasting love.

And faith comes from the word and the word comes from God.

We can't produce this faith ourselves; it's not a product of our intellects or our imaginations or our emotions.

Faith is a gift from God, something that God creates and sustains and nourishes in us as *we listen to Him and take Him at His word.*

When we entrust ourselves to the word of God, the incarnate Word and the words of Scripture, the Holy Spirit works through the word to create faith in us.

And as we continue in His word we come to know the truth and the truth sets us free and brings the peace that passes understanding.

And we will dwell in a clean, well-lighted place for all eternity.

Amen.