

Kirby Lawrence Hill                      Abington Presbyterian Church  
December 24, 2017    Christmas Eve  
Isaiah 9:2-7  
Luke 2:1-20

## TUG OF PEACE

At a church I served previously, nativity scenes comprised of young children were an annual tradition. Each year, some group of adults had the difficult task of determining who would play which role. Who would be Mary and Joseph? There would be three magi with their three gifts. The remaining children would be either shepherds or angels. One year, Mary was being played by a five-year-old who could have been described as either ‘determined’ or ‘head-strong’ depending upon who you talked to. She had always been an angel in previous years and was delighted to have been promoted to the ‘top role.’

Among the angels was a two-and-a-half-year-old girl who was in her first Christmas pageant. Her parents wanted to make sure that an older angel kept her eye on the littlest angel that year, so she would not succumb to any temptations to wander from her assigned spot. Things started out just great, with Mary in her blue robe and headdress looking adoringly at the baby doll Jesus that was in the manger. But then, as the congregation began singing “Away in a Manger,” the littlest angel decided she wanted to see the baby Jesus. As she tried to move up to where Mary and Joseph were watching over the baby, she stepped on her white angel robe that was a couple of sizes too big for her and she went down. She also was slipping a bit with her footing in the hay that had been scattered on the floor. But she was not deterred in the least. Mary wasn’t the only determined one in the cast. The older guardian angel assigned to the little one tried to place hands on the little angel’s shoulders, but that was not going to slow her down. Neither did stage whispers emanating from the director. I’m not sure archangel Gabriel could have kept that little angel from moving up toward the manger. As if she were on a mission from God, she was going to see the baby Jesus.

Most parents were mildly amused at what was happening, but the littlest angel's parents were growing in concern as their daughter approached the manger. They wondered what was going on in that head under the halo that was now askew. I have it on good authority that the angel's parents considered clipping their little one's wings by carrying her off stage, but they were appropriately concerned that something you wouldn't normally hear from an angel's mouth might escape in the process, so they froze as they watched intently. Meanwhile, as the little angel approached, the young Mary suddenly got to feeling a little protective of her special place next to Jesus, so she leaned over and scooped up the baby doll into her arms. Of course, the littlest angel wanted to get to hold the baby as well. Now Mary's parents and the angel's parents, with great fear and trembling, began praying that a royal tug-of-war wouldn't break out that might result in some kind of dismemberment of the holy child before God and everyone.

It is a bit funny to think back on that scene now, but as the pastor overseeing that joyous and sacred observance of the celebration of the birth of our Lord, I was concerned how that situation would all play out. In other settings, you are probably aware that there have been adults who have gotten into some kind of tug-of-war over Jesus. Why and to whom did he come? What was his purpose? If they could physically do so, it seems like they would literally grab hold of Jesus and say, "He's mine. You can't have him."

To avoid such a tug-a-war, we turn back to what we learn from the angel in the story – not the littlest angel at the Christmas pageant, but the angel who proclaimed Jesus' birth on the night of his arrival. Luke tells us the angel told the shepherds, "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people." This is One who comes to show us that God's love for one person or one group does not mean there would be no love left for some other person or group. God's love is not a zero-sum game. It is not like a budget or a tax package where there are winners and losers. Jesus comes as an embodiment of God's good and loving news for all the people. Jesus doesn't belong to just one group of people. Rather, we are invited to recognize his Lordship, and acknowledge that he doesn't belong to us so that we could take him away from someone else, but that instead, we

belong to him. That is such good news that the whole angelic host then proclaimed, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth, peace!”

That the message originally was delivered to shepherds reinforces that the news was to be for all people. Shepherds as presented in Christmas pageants get cleaned up a good bit, but because of the nature of their work with animals, they would have been considered ritually unclean. As a result, shepherds would not normally have been welcomed at religious services. They generally did not have formal education and their pay level was at the bottom of the scale. It would then seem to be of significance that the angel of the Lord did not deliver the message of the birth of the Messiah to the top priests at the temple or to the Roman governor or to the mayor of Bethlehem. The news wasn't given at the top and expected to maybe trickle down. The news came to those at the bottom to demonstrate God's deep care for all people.

The way this divine entrance occurs also indicates that God doesn't play tug-of-war with us, yanking at us, overpowering us, forcing us to believe in and follow this One who comes as God in human flesh. God works not by coercion, but by a beckoning inspiration. So, I'd rather call God's coming in human form a tug-of-peace, where the divine entrance occurs in a way that would gently tug on our heart strings or on our spirit so that we would want to hold onto God instead of rejecting God. It is amazing to think of a God who is powerful enough to create the whole universe who comes to us as an infant who can't even hold up his own head, but that is how far God goes in this tug-of-peace strategy. God comes to us in a humanly compelling way, not in a way that forcefully compels. The prophet Isaiah helps us understand what kind of entrance this is: “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting, Prince of Peace.” He comes to enable us to relish the reign established and upheld with justice and with righteousness. <sup>1</sup>

Are you curious about how that Christmas pageant turned out years ago? I'll just say that a good bit of grace was evident that night, for as the littlest angel approached head-strong Mary who was holding the baby doll Jesus, the mother of

our Lord offered the baby to the little angel to hold for a while. And the congregation and the parents and the pastor were all smiling, some of them with great relief, as they saw Mary and the angel take turns passing the baby Jesus back and forth, even while the congregation finished singing “Away in a Manger” with these words, “Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask thee to stay close by me forever and love me, I pray. Bless all the dear children in they tender care, and fit us for heaven to live with thee there.”<sup>2</sup> God’s tug-of-peace comes this night. Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth, peace. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 9:6-7

<sup>2</sup> This anonymous hymn has at times been attributed to Martin Luther, but in a note in our Glory to God hymnal, it likely was written by Pennsylvania Lutherans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.