

December 24, 2023
The Eve of the Feast of the Nativity
St. Andrew's, Ada; St. Stephen's, Catlett
\\S\B-24\Christmas Eve_122423

Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-14

Luke tells us that Jesus was born during the reign of Caesar Augustus, where *caesar* is the Latin word for emperor. Today's Caesar is Julius Caesar's great-nephew, whose given name was Octavian. Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 BCE, leaving the Roman Empire in the hands of what was called a triumvirate (three men): Julius' great-nephew Octavian and two of Julius' top generals, Marc Antony and Marcus Lepidus, who shared the throne with Octavian. Octavian murdered both Antony and Lepidus and became the sole emperor (*caesar*) in 31 BCE. Ironically, the guy who killed his two partners ushered in the greatest period of peace in the history of the Roman Empire, for which the Roman senate gave him the title of *Augustus* (great, majestic) in 27 BCE, and we get the month of August from him (Octavian means eighth, as in the eighth month). So this is the Gospel's Caesar Augustus, bringer of the great *Pax Romana* (Peace of Rome). It's important to us because Jesus was born into that very unusual 30-year period of world peace; as hard to imagine back then as it is today. It's striking, then, that our Christmas Gospel ends with the angelic choir singing "Peace on Earth." This birth brings a peace that even the great Caesar Augustus could not begin to hope for. It was a peace that transcended world events, even in Rome.

There seems to be a bit of a catch, though. God's peace, far surpassing Caesar's peace, seems to be extended only "to those whom God favors" (Luke 2:14). The earliest manuscripts, however, have the angels saying "Peace to all people, whom God favors," or, as the *Book of Common Prayer* translates, "Peace to His people on earth" (BCP, page 356). Once again, we see that a comma can make all the difference. The very fact that shepherds were the first to receive the divine announcement is an indication that God doesn't want anyone to be excluded from this first Christmas. So what we have, then, is an invitation to experience the kind of peace that world leaders from Caesar Augustus to the present day can only offer in its weakest, most fragile form: peace contingent solely on the behavior of the individuals involved. World peace is, at best, a temporary reprieve from war. God's peace, in contrast, is a permanent state of being offered to all of us, whom (by the way) God favors. The peace came with a price, of though; the price of a human life. But even then, the nature of human life itself is temporary, while the nature of the divine is eternal. The eternal invaded the temporal at Christmas and blessed it, redeemed it, and restored it to God's eternal peace. Or, as Paul told Titus, at Christmas the "grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all" (2:11).

The trick, it seems to me, is getting our hands on that grace and peace and then not letting go of it for anything. Psalm 96 offers us one way of doing that: "Sing to the Lord a new song," it says (96:1). "Sing to the Lord and bless His Name; proclaim the good news of His salvation from day to day" (vs. 2). Those verses suggest changing our tune to this new one that proclaims God's peace and then to sing it, if only to ourselves, every single day. Reminding ourselves of what God has already done for us will turn our attention to what God is doing at this very moment and promises to do tomorrow, the day after that, and on into the unforeseeable future.

If we're not feeling the peace of God this Christmas and all year long, it's not because we're not among those whom God favors. God favors all of creation, especially humans. If we're not feeling the favor and the peace, it could be that we're just singing the same old sad song about how miserable we are. "Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the whole earth." Remind yourself of God's salvation from day to day, and you're sure to find the peace the angels were singing about.