



a season of invitation and promise
luke 2.⁴⁻²⁰

a season of invitation...

“It came upon the mid-night clear,” as the hymnist imagines it, that a chorus of angels delivered “good tidings of great joy” with its implied invitation,

“Oh, come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant!

Oh, come ye, oh come ye to Bethlehem.

Come and behold him... Oh, come, let us adore him.”¹

So often, the good news of the Gospel—yes, that is a redundancy—becomes thought of in terms more akin to command or decree with implied threats, than invitation and promise. Such emphasis often zaps our strength and discourages our heart. If we listen carefully, however, the Christmas Season reminds us that the gospel comes by way of invitation. The Christmas season is, in fact, a special time of invitation. We will hear the repeated invitation in the beloved Christmas hymns that we so eagerly look forward to singing each year. They will invite us over and over again to enter the Christmas story and make it something more than history. They will invite us to relive and glory in that most extraordinary and influential of all births.

“Come to Bethlehem and see Him whose birth the angels sing;

¹ “Oh, Come, All Ye Faithful,” Hymn #202

Come, adore on bended knee Christ the Lord, the new-born King.”²

We are invited to take part in the events of that “silent night.”

“Joyful, all ye nations, rise;
Join the triumph of the skies;
With the angelic host proclaim
Christ is born in Bethlehem”³

“Lord, with the angels we too would rejoice;
Help us to sing with the heart and voice:
Glory to God in the highest;
Peace on earth, good will to men.”⁴

All of this is, of course, consistent with the constant invitation found in scripture. We hear it in one of the earliest invitations found in the Book of Mormon,

“And now, I would commend you to seek this Jesus of whom the prophets and apostles have written, that the grace of God the Father, and also the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost, which beareth record of them, may be and abide in you forever. Amen.”⁵

Invitation and promise—invitation to seek, and promise of Divinity abiding in us. We hear the invitation in that’s book’s final discourse.

“Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness;⁶ and if ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all

² “Angels We Have Heard on High,” Hymn #203

³ “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” Hymn 209

⁴ “Far, Far Away on Judea’s Plains,” Hymn #212)

⁵ Ether 12:41

⁶ So often, when we read this “deny yourselves of all ungodliness,” we read it with a view of God wagging his finger at us: “You had just better deny yourselves of all ungodliness!” But why? Why do we read it like this? What is wrong with our culture that it so often darkens such hopeful sentiments with threat and retribution? Why, O why, O why must we always take the peace and joy out of every

your might, mind and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ; and if by the grace of God ye are perfect in Christ, ye can in nowise deny the power of God.”⁷

In between these two, we hear invitation in Jacob’s, heart-felt desire for all people:

“Wherefore, we would to God that... all men would believe in Christ, and view his death...”⁸

Now, this “viewing of his death” is a worthy goal. It is one that we would each do well to adopt as our own. But, during this Christmas Season, we take the liberty to change this desire.

Wherefore, we would to God that... all men would believe in Christ, and view his *birth*....

As wonderful and encouraging as these “second-hand” invitations are, it is a “first-hand” invitation such as the following that fills one with the greatest sense of awe, hope, and joy.

“Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.
For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”⁹

We will have more to say about this last invitation in a future Christmas devotional related to the passage, but for now we can see the theme of invitation and promise. How encouraging this is! How very comforting!

hopeful invitation? Why can’t we see this as invitation and promise rather than command and threat? “Come unto Christ and through him become perfected, through him find the power to deny ungodliness! Now, there’s something to be excited about; something to shout about; something that removes rather than applies a burden. There is invitation and promise!

⁷ Moroni 10:32

⁸ Jacob 1:8

⁹ Matthew 11:28-30

...and a season of promise

We have seen several blessings in the invitations mentioned above. There is “grace,” and “rest,” to mention two. As we look at Luke 2:4-20, we can identify others. There is the promise of a “Savior,” with its implied accompanying “salvation.”

“Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.”¹⁰

Salvation

We will look first at this promise of a Savior, and hence of salvation. The Greek word has at its core the idea of delivering or rescuing “in the sense of an acutely dynamic act in which gods or men snatch others by force from serious peril.”¹¹ In addition, the rescue is one in which the individual is rescued, “*safe and sound*.” An analogy may be in order.

If a fireman dashes into a burning home, sweeps a child out of its bed and into his arms, runs out of the home, places the child in the arms of its mother, and finds that the child has suffered third degree burns, he has not “saved” the child as “salvation” is conceived in scripture. In order to “save” the child as scripture counts salvation, the fireman would have to find, upon returning the child to its mother, that the child was “safe” *and* “sound”—unharmful. There can be no third degree burns on the child’s body. There is not a singed hair found on the child’s body.

Now, in scripture, we are not “rescued” from impersonal, unthinking, and transitory forces such as the fire in our previous example. The danger or threat scripture deals with is eternal. It is malignant, it is personal, and it is volitional. There is an evil “intent” to destroy and kill. There is, then, an enemy. This enemy must be defeated if there is to be “rescue.” Therefore, it is appropriate to think of “salvation” not only as “rescue,” but as “victory,” “triumph.”

¹⁰ Luke 2:10-11

¹¹ See *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. VII, p. 966.

This, then, is the enormous promise pronounced to humble shepherds. The announced child would be one who brings victory over the most threatening of enemies. Thus we see how very appropriate are the hymnists' invitations:

“Oh, come, all ye faithful, joyful and **TRIUMPHANT!**”

“Joyful, all ye nations, rise; Join the **TRIUMPH** of the skies...”

Peace

We now turn our attention to the promises uttered in what is often called the “*Gloria in excelsis*.”

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”¹²

The idea of “peace,” can be closely linked with the idea of “salvation,” or “victory.” War seems to be one of the most consistent features of human history. Lucifer threatened that he would “buy up armies and navies... and reign with blood and horror on the earth,” and he has certainly kept his promise, with the aid of millions of complicit human allies. Humankind only experiences “peace” when one side or the other has decisively defeated the enemy and imposed strict prohibitions and limitations as to future behavior, thus enjoying “triumph.” The Greek idea of “peace” is more akin to this than to the individual, internal or emotional peace we so often think and speak of.¹³

From this perspective, then, the promised “peace on earth” might be thought of as that end of war brought about by the Messiah’s triumphant reign on earth—a peace inaugurated after he has subdued all hostilities and/or defeated every enemy. Scripture has several suggestions for how this “peace on earth” is to be achieved. While humankind can and must play a role in this “peace,” it is initiated and empowered by the Messiah. One example from Isaiah will

¹² There has been much discussion concerning this angelic proclamation. There is an alternative, and possible older reading, which is often preferred. For reasons too many and difficult to go into here, I am going to stick with the traditional reading and translation.

¹³ TDOT states that peace was thought of as a “‘time of peace’ or ‘state of peace,’ originally conceived of purely as an interlude in the everlasting state of war.”

have to suffice for our purposes here. Consider this well-known passage:

“In days to come
the Mountain, on which Yahweh’s temple stands,
will be fixed above any other Mountain;
lifted above any other height.
All nations will come streaming to it;
many peoples will come, saying:
Come! Let’s go up to Yahweh’s mountain;
to the temple of the God of Ya‘qōb.
He will teach us his ways,
and we shall walk in his paths.
For Torah will come out of Šîyôn,
and the word of Yahweh from Y^erûšālāyim.
Then will He mediate between nations;
He will reconcile many peoples,
so that they will retool their swords into plow blades
and their spears into pruning instruments.

One nation will no longer lift the sword against another,
nor will they any longer train for warfare.”¹⁴

In this passage, we see that God initiates any potential or realized peace on earth by providing “Torah,” or “instruction.” As people come to him (represented here by his structural temple), he teaches them how to walk. He teaches them how to treat others so as to produce the best possible relationships. “If you will refrain from adulterous relationships,” teaches Yahweh, “the ill feeling, contention, and outright hostilities caused by that breach of trust will be eliminated. You will be at peace with your spouse and your neighbor.”

“Peace on earth” begins with this babe wrapped in swaddling clothes. His life exemplifies the peaceable life. In teaching us of his ways, he taught us how to live the peaceable life. None

¹⁴ Isaiah 2:2-4; author’s translation.

of his teachings concerning the means to peace, it seems to me, are any clearer than these:

“All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.”¹⁵

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

This is the first and great commandment.

And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”¹⁶

However, we must respond to this wisdom. We must practice those virtues that are creators and companions of peace. What will you do during this Christmas Season; what will you change in yourself, to facilitate peace between yourself and those with whom you deal directly? Peace on earth begins with him and ends with you. Will peace end with you, or will you end in peace?

Good Will

One way of thinking about the *Gloria* is to see a kind of movement from the ultimate to the intimate. “Glory to God in the highest” speaks of God in his glory and majesty. It reminds us who and what we worship. “And on earth peace,” reminds us that the human race survives and advances together or not at all.

“Good will toward men” moves toward the intimacy between God, the ultimate, and the individual. When I read this, I hear the divine revelation that God is a Being who possesses unimaginably good feelings and desires for each individual. I say unimaginable because it is clear that we consistently imagine a less generous and good-willed God than he is. Humans have rarely been able to do anything more than create gods “whose image is in the likeness of the world;”¹⁷ or, as Paul puts it less gently, they “changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man...”¹⁸

¹⁵ Matthew 7:12

¹⁶ Matthew 22:37-39

¹⁷ DC 1:16

¹⁸ Romans 1:23. It would be a mistake to understand the idolatrous error only in terms of a *physical* representation. Their idolatry includes their having imagined a god who thinks and feels and reacts as we do.

In speaking of Christ's love, Paul declares that its "breadth, and length, and depth, and height... passeth knowledge. In speaking of Father and Son's willingness and ability to act in our lives, Paul maintains that it is "exceeding abundant above all that we ask or think."¹⁹ Obviously, the same could and should be said about the Father and Son's "good will."

In the same letter, Paul lists a series of blessings that come into our lives in, through, and by Christ. They come to us "according to" ("consistent with," "agreeable to," "corresponding to" or "in harmony with") "the good pleasure of his [Father's] will," or "'his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself."²⁰ His desire and commitment to bless flows from an inner divine will—an "I-want-and-intend-to-bless attitude. God is a good-willed being. He enjoys people. He appreciates each individual. He is an accepting Being. To have faith means, in part, to believe this.

"Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit."²¹

Little wonder that the shepherds, upon receiving this extraordinary revelation concerning God and the good will he possesses for his children, accepted the invitation to go and see the Christ child. Little wonder that they went forth "glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen."²² Little wonder that Paul, consistent with Luke's reportage of the shepherds' joyful response, repeatedly reminds the Saints of Ephesus that they will be "to the praise of the glory of his grace!"²³

May we, this Christmas Season, praise him. May we cause others to praise him. May we "join the triumph of the skies," and "with the angelic host proclaim,"²⁴

¹⁹ See Ephesians 3:18-20

²⁰ See Ephesians 1:5 and 9

²¹ Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. I, Book III, p. 551

²² Luke 2:20

²³ See Ephesians 1:6, 12, and 14

²⁴ "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing"

“I will bless the LORD at all times:
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
My soul shall make her boast in the LORD:
the humble shall hear thereof, and be glad.
O magnify the LORD with me,
and let us exalt his name together.”²⁵

During this Christmas Season, and for days without number thereafter, may we accept and experience this hopeful invitation,

“In this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him, still
The dear Christ enters in.”²⁶

Indeed, in word in deed, may we extend our own sincere invitation, knowing that he will gladly accept,

“Be near me, Lord Jesus;
I ask thee to stay
Close by me forever,
And love me, I pray.”²⁷

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

²⁵ Psalm 34:1-3

²⁶ “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” Hymn #208

²⁷ “Away in a Manger,” Hymn #206