

This Advent our Wednesday evening series invited us to contemplate angels – the role of angels and what we can learn and gain spiritually from being aware of angels in the Scriptures and in our lives. It was also chance to tell some of our angel stories. And a lot of Christmas movies feature angels who have come in human form...like “It’s a Wonderful Life” and “The Christmas Visitor.” But one of my favorite Christmas movies is the 1947 classic, “The Bishop’s Wife.” If you haven’t seen it, it’s a great story about an angel, played by Cary Grant. Loretta Young plays the bishop’s wife, and the Episcopal Bishop is played by David Niven. The angel comes in response to the bishop’s prayers for help, but the bishop is so focused on his own work of building a Cathedral that he forgets the meaning of Christmas - and he isn’t really able to accept the angel’s help, until the very end. The angel, meanwhile, brings life and goodness to everyone he meets- and reminds everyone of the meaning and purpose of life and of Christmas itself. I adore the short sermon that the angel wrote, and that the bishop preaches on Christmas Eve in the film. He says,

“Tonight, I want to tell you the story of an empty stocking.

Once upon a midnight clear, there was a child's cry, a blazing star hung over a stable, and wise men came with birthday gifts. We haven't forgotten that night down the centuries. We celebrate it with stars on Christmas trees, with the sound of bells, and with gifts.

But especially with gifts. You give me a book; I give you a tie. Aunt Martha has always wanted an orange squeezer and Uncle Henry can do with a new pipe. For we forget nobody, adult, or child. All the stockings are filled, all that is, except one. And we have even forgotten to hang it up. The stocking for the child born in a manger. It’s his birthday we're celebrating. Don't let us ever forget that.

Let us ask ourselves what He would wish for most. And then, let each put in his share, loving kindness, warm hearts, and a stretched-out hand of tolerance...all the shining gifts that make peace on earth.”

I love that the sermon asks us to consider what Jesus would wish for most. What does Jesus wish for? We all know it can’t be bought at a shopping mall, Target, or even Amazon.

And the Gospel provides us an answer, I think, very much in line with the angel’s sermon - and it is found in the proclamation of the angels to the shepherds that first Christmas: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace...” That message of peace on earth is truly the Christmas message. And in fact, we say or sing those very words most Sundays in our opening Gloria. This proclamation of glory and peace never gets old, because it always needs to be testified to in new and relevant ways, especially in light of the violence and division we see in our nation and in the wars that continue to rage in our world in places like Ukraine.

Peace can feel like a lofty or even cliché concept - but consider that peace is possible because of the Incarnation - God in Christ has broken down the barriers between us, our neighbors and God. And this is not the kind of peace the world offers- this is God’s peace.

God’s peace is given by grace - and then can be cultivated within the human heart. In fact, our hearts can become a source of peace by grace - imagine your heart serving like a manger for Jesus - cradling Jesus in your heart by simply opening and receiving his words of love, forgiveness, and peace. Whatever unrest or war is being waged within you or in your heart - we can relinquish it to God - and, as the Christmas hymn beckons us to do - “make room” ... “Let every heart, prepare him room” and then our hearts can sing with God’s joy and peace.

Once we have that divine peace in our hearts, then we can extend that peace to others...because our world is desperately in need of the peace that Jesus brings- and it is ours to share and give to the world- and that is a gift worth giving as we celebrate Jesus’ birth.

Make peace, bring peace, and receive the gift of peace that the angels proclaimed. AMEN.