

Why Are You Here?

^{CEB} **Luke 2:1** In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. ² This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. ³ Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. ⁴ Since Joseph belonged to David's house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David's city, called Bethlehem, in Judea.

⁵ He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. ⁷ She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.

⁸ Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. ⁹ The Lord's angel stood before them, the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you--wonderful, joyous news for all people. ¹¹ Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord. ¹² This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger." ¹³ Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors."

¹⁵ When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go right now to Bethlehem and see what's happened. Let's confirm what the Lord has revealed to us." ¹⁶ They went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they reported what they had been told about this child. ¹⁸ Everyone who heard it was amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ Mary committed these things to memory and considered them carefully.

²⁰ The shepherds returned home, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. Everything happened just as they had been told. (Luke 2:1-20 CEB)

Why Are You Here?

Why are you here this evening? Almost certainly, each of us is here because of our yearning for unity, for purity, and for peace. Some are here because they are motivated by a desire for unity. You want to sit with family and sing wonderful Christmas carols together. You want to be together with old and new friends on this special night. Even in today's culture of individualism and friending via the internet, there is still an especially warm feeling when you're in the same room with friends and doing something together. And as we gather around the Lord's Table to celebrate being in communion with Jesus Christ, we remember that there is a huge community across time and space that is unified in our worship of a babe in a manger. Most of us long for unity and find a measure of it here this evening.

We also long for purity. We want to hear again about a moment in time that was pure. There was the pure wonderment of the shepherds. Their evening was filled with the pure glory of the announcement by the angel and the host of heaven. There was the pure wonder of seeking and finding a baby that had been proclaimed by those heavenly beings. We picture an evening of pure bliss as Joseph and Mary gaze at their new son, and are amazed to hear the shepherds tell their story. Like Mary, we want to hold all of the glory and purity of this night in our heart and think on it over and over. As we listen to Luke's account of the birth of Jesus, the story is one of pure bliss, a story untarnished by tension, jealousy, anger, or envy.

Most pure of all is this expression of God's love. This baby isn't something that we deserved. We aren't entitled to the gift of God-with-us. And we certainly didn't expect Israel's savior to be a peasant baby born to poor peasant parents – people with no means, no stature in society, and no prospects for the future. This baby is a pure gift – an unexpected and undeserved arrival.

Perhaps most of all, whether we're conscious of it or not, we long for peace - peace in our family, peace in our heart, peace in our community, peace around the world. Every family experiences moments that are very much the opposite of peaceful. Our mental picture of family is that it's a warm, loving, peaceful relationship, and reality often disappoints us. We'd love to have peace in our hearts, to be free of nagging guilt about times when we've failed in some way, to be free of cultural pressure to work harder and harder to make more and more so that we can own more. But there's little peace in our hearts when we realize that we don't own our stuff – our stuff owns us!

We hear of a car-jacking in New Jersey and our peace of mind is shaky when we park our car in a store parking lot. We worry if we're safe in our community. We wrestle with conflicting issues of poverty versus entitlement, prosperity versus greed, free speech versus ugly rumors and bold lies. Often there seems to be little purity, little unity, and little peace in the community.

And we are so very discouraged by the toll of war - no matter what name you give it. Constant images of bombed schools, gassed children, bloodied and maimed civilians, casket after flag draped casket, and soldiers who will struggle for the rest of their lives with broken bodies and broken minds - constant images that make peace seem like a fuzzy, unreal dream.

And so we grasp weakly at the angels' song of "Peace on earth, goodwill toward all people." But we are reaching for hope in the right place. We're reminded that indeed, the Prince of Peace has come. He came, not as the son of a ruling family, but as a baby in a family that was much more numerous, much more common. When we actually follow his teachings, when we walk in his footsteps, when we become his students and live as his disciples, we find that our lives begin to have more unity, more purity, and more peace.

Jesus was focused, not on himself, but on others. When we turn our attention and energy to the good of other people, wonderful things happen. Families become stronger

and unified. Communities actually act like communities instead of a collection of isolated individuals.

When we act in loving ways with family, then friends, and then with strangers, it's astonishing how much love we receive in return. And as the level of love increases in our life, our eyes are opened to begin to see the extraordinary love that God has for us, love so pure that it cannot be extinguished or diminished.

There's great peace in knowing that you're loved. Someone remarked to me Sunday that the neat thing about hugs is that when you give one you get one. Love is that way. The love you give will return. People will not hate you for caring about them. Love begets love. Compassion stimulates a peaceful response.

The road to peace is always a journey of greater length than you wish. It takes you longer to forgive yourself than it takes for God to forgive you. But once you begin to understand that undeserved forgiveness is what the Prince of Peace brings, then you can start to have peace in your heart. Peace in your family will increase in relation to how much love you give. Peace in your community increases in proportion to the offering of love through caring and compassion.

At all levels, peace begins with conversation. Talk to God in prayer. No special words or ritual is required. Just talk. And talk to yourself. Peace in your heart begins with forgiving yourself. Peace in your family begins with actually communicating honestly and openly with each other. Peace in the community begins with awareness and understanding of each other – and that comes from talking with each other. “There is still only one way to eliminate our enemies, [whether they be ourselves, our family, our neighbors, or foreign nations], and that is to make them our friends.” (Mark in Ladue Chapel Bell, Dec. 13)

If it is peace you seek tonight, I pray that you will begin the journey. Swallow your pride and make the first move to reach out to someone. Pride is vastly overrated. And on this night, we remember that God swallowed all that divine pride – and came to live as a common nobody – Emmanuel – God with us. Welcome the Babe – and follow in his path. Amen!