

Do you hear what I hear?

December 4, 2022 \* Langford Community Church \* Graham Gladstone

Out of all of the Christmas carols that we are looking at this year, the one we're going to look at today is unique for me in that I can still remember the first time I heard it. I have many fond memories of standing in church singing 'Glo-ooo-ooo-ria' (from 'Angels we have heard on high') but I have no idea when I first heard that song.

This one though is different. I have a very clear memory of the first time I heard 'Do you hear what I hear?'

I was sitting at the back of our church, in the Gladstone pew – right at the back, easy to sneak in if you were a little late ;) – and my dad got up to sing a solo. My mom played piano, my dad sang and this is the song that he sang.

Immediately, I loved it. It's such a neat song – (do you hear what I hear – root note, dominant, octave – you didn't think you were going to get music theory today did you?) – but beyond that, what a neat imaginative retelling of the night that Jesus was born.

Now admittedly, this is an alternate history – the song imagines what would have been like if instead of bloodthirsty Herod it had been 'a king who was receptive to the news that Jesus was born!' who heard the news– but I think it's helpful for us because it helps us to think about what the birth of Jesus means if we are open to humble ourselves and receive Him.

So let's take a look this morning at 'Do you hear what I hear' and we'll think about what Jesus' birth means for us.

So, verse one:

Said the night wind to the little lamb / Do you see what I see  
Way up in the sky little lamb / Do you see what I see

One of the things I like about this song is its use of personification. That is, giving things that aren't human human traits. Let's be honest – the night wind and little lambs can't ACTUALLY talk – but we can imagine that if they could talk, this is what they might say.

And there's actually something to this, biblically. The Bible personifies Creation all the time.

Psalm 19 - 1 The heavens declare the glory of God... 2 Day after day they pour forth speech... 4 Their voice goes out into all the earth.

Isaiah 55:12 - 12 ... the mountains and hills will burst into song ... and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.

Psalm 98:8 - 8 Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy.

It's these verses that 'Joy to the world' is thinking of when we sing:

While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains, Repeat the sounding joy...

According to the Bible, Creation 'speaks' all the time. And notice, when it speaks, more often than not, it's pointing to God or it's praising God.

And that's what's happening here. The wind has seen something that points to the glory of God and so it says to a little lamb: 'do you see what I see?'

What did he see?

A star, a star / Dancing in the night  
With a tail as big as a kite / With a tail as big as a kite

I don't know if it was dancing, but the Bible tells us that there was absolutely a star the night that Jesus was born and apparently for two years thereafter.

It was the star that brought the wise men to see Jesus. Matthew 2:2 – "They came to Herod and asked 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.'" The ancient world believed that the birth of great men would be announced in the skies. So when these wise men from the Babylonian royal court saw this brilliant star in the sky, they packed up the Caravan and hit the road to find the king the star was pointing to.

They were excited about the star (and the king) and according to this song, so was the little lamb. And so the lamb went to share the news. Verse 2 –

Said the little lamb to the shepherd boy / Do you hear what I hear  
Ringing through the sky shepherd boy / Do you hear what I hear  
A song, a song / High above the trees  
With a voice as big as the sea / With a voice as big as the sea

What's he talking about? What song is this? What song was sung on Christmas Eve?

It's the song the angels sang – 'Glory to God in the highest! Peace on earth from God on high!'

You can just imagine – the shepherd boy out in the fields with the other shepherds – and this choir of angels appears out of nowhere singing about the birth of Jesus. Now I've never heard an angel choir before but I'll bet they'd drown out a Taylor Swift concert – so I think this is a neat way to put it – 'with a voice as big as the sea!' The voice of the angel choir, the song they're singing – it's huge! – and it's proclaiming peace on earth from God on high.

Well, that's too good to keep to yourself and so off the shepherd boy goes to the king. Verse 3 –

Said the shepherd boy to the mighty king / Do you know what I know  
In your palace wall mighty king / Do you know what I know  
A child, a child / Shivers in the cold  
Let us bring him silver and gold / Let us bring him silver and gold

This is such a neat juxtaposition. First off, you've got a shepherd boy talking to the king and then out top of that he says – 'Oh mighty king, nice and warm in your palace with all your pillows and your robes, do you know that there is a child out there, in a manger somewhere, who is even greater than you, with nothing but straw to keep Him warm? We should bring Him silver and gold and frankly all the wealth of your palace. He deserves better than to shiver in the cold.'

The shepherd boy points to the baby in the manger and calls it like it is – HE is the king that deserves our praise.

Well, with this news, what do you suppose the king might say?

We KNOW what one king said, don't we? When the wise men announced the birth of Jesus to King Herod, Herod was upset. That's not strong enough – Herod was thrown into a murderous frenzy. Matthew 2:13, an angel says to Joseph: "Herod is going to search for the child to kill him" and indeed, he gave an order that all boys two years and younger in the region of Bethlehem be murdered (Matthew 2:16).<sup>1</sup> Herod heard about the birth of Jesus, realized that He was a threat to His throne and tried to get rid of Him.

But what do you suppose would have happened if instead of Herod, it was a king who was open to the purposes of God on the throne? What if it had been a king who was sensitive to God's leading and humble enough to admit that his own power came from God and was subservient to Him in every way?

This song takes a stab at answering that question. The king considers who it is that has been born, His authority and greatness and says - verse 4:

Said the king to the people everywhere / Listen to what I say  
Pray for peace people everywhere / Listen to what I say  
The child, the child / Sleeping in the night  
He will bring us goodness and light / He will bring us goodness and light

In this song, the king realizes that there is something special about this child and uses the authority that he has – 'listen to what I say' – to point to the king who is greater than him. He announces – 'This new baby king will bring us goodness and light.'

Now that's a very biblical idea. We sang it earlier today. 'Light of the world / You stepped down into darkness.' (There's always a reason why we sing the songs we do).

John 1:9 puts it even more clearly - 9 The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

This king has it exactly right – Jesus came into the world to give us light. And not just 'light' like the electromagnetic phenomenon that allows the human eye to see; Jesus came to bring us 'light' in its symbolic sense. Jesus came to bring us 'light' as in life and hope and safety and warmth.

And I discovered something really neat this week – Ephesians 5:9 – the only place in the Bible where goodness and light appear side by side – and there it says that 'the fruit of light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth.'

That means that when you take the symbolism of light and give it a literal form, you get goodness. Goodness is the fruit of light. Goodness is light applied. Which means that Jesus didn't just come to give us symbolic hope and safety and warmth but literal hope and safe and warmth – in a word, goodness. He came to bring us goodness and light.

And I think it's really interesting to see what the king tells the people to do 'in light' of Jesus' goodness. If Jesus brings us goodness and light what are the implications for us? What good can Jesus' light bring to the world? What does the king say?

Pray for peace, people, everywhere!

Jesus' goodness and light moves us to pray for peace. If you think about it, this is a stunning admission on the king's part. Every worldly king wants to think that they alone can bring peace to their country, that they alone can save their nation. Five years ago, Donald Trump was saying 'I alone can save America.' And yet this king humbles himself to admit that he himself cannot conjure up peace. He in his human strength is no hope for peace. But Jesus, the divine child who brings us goodness and light, HE gives us hope for peace. And so Jesus' goodness and light move him to call us all to pray for peace.

And you know, this song is on to something. Just like we saw last week, Jesus came to bring peace on earth – peace with God and peace with others. We spent a lot of time last week talking about peace with God; this week I want to look at the other half and talk about peace with others.

Ephesians 2:14-17 says this:

14 For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility

15 by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace,

16 and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

17 And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.

This passage is specifically talking about Jews and Gentiles – 'He has made us BOTH one;' 'He has created in Himself one new man in place of two' – but this passage has larger implications for all of humanity.

Three times in those four verses, Paul tells us that Jesus has broken down the dividing walls between people to make us one – verse 14, to make one new man – verse 15, one body – verse 16.

And here's how He did it. He took in His own flesh the sins that separate us from God and keep us from loving our neighbour as ourselves. He carried them to the Cross to pay for the sins of ALL people: for the sins of white people and the sins of black people and the sins of native people and the sins of Asian people and the sins of Ukranian people and the sins of Russian people and to reconcile us ALL to Himself and bring us together into the unity of the family of God.

That's how (verse 14) He is Himself our peace. He has broken the dividing walls of hostility and He has killed the conflict that we have all entertained in our hearts. From Jesus' point of view, there is no reason for war because He has made us one before God. He has held out to us the prospect of peace if we will only receive it.

But we don't always receive it, do we? As a people, generally. As individuals, as followers of Jesus, we receive the peace of God and make every effort to extend that peace to others, but as a culture, as a race, we rebuild those dividing walls. We go to war to get what the other guy has.

And so this song reminds us – pray for peace, people, everywhere. When people break the unity of humanity that Jesus died to secure, we pray that He would step in to restore the peace. Knowing that Jesus has come to give us light and goodness, let us pray that He would apply that goodness to bring us the peace that He Himself already died to give us two thousand years ago.

Because Jesus is good, pray for peace, people everywhere.

Now if that sounds a little naïve to you, a little too Pollyanna, then let me add one more layer to this song.

'Do you hear what I hear' was written in 1962 at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Now, if you're too young to remember the Cuban Missile Crisis, here's a super broad-strokes description of what happened. In 1962, the Soviet Union put nuclear missiles on Cuban soil (they were allies) and those missiles were capable of hitting American cities. For thirteen days, the world hung in the balance, as the United States and the Soviet Union debated launching nuclear missiles at one another. A nuclear strike by one nation would have caused a retaliatory strike from the other and that would have caused cataclysmic destruction and death around the world. The world came about as close to destruction as it ever has...

And that inspired two songwriters to write this song. 'Do you hear what I hear' was written in the middle of the Cuban Missile Crisis.<sup>ii</sup> The star with a tail as big as a kite? That's a veiled reference to a nuclear missile flying overhead. In the midst of a potentially world-ending cataclysm, they wrote this song calling people to 'pray for peace people everywhere.'<sup>iii</sup>

But notice, they didn't just say 'pray for peace.' They couched that call to prayer in the context of Jesus' coming to earth. They said 'Jesus' goodness and light are reasons to believe that we can have peace, so because of that, pray for peace on.' These were not Christian songwriters and yet they looked at the arrival of Jesus into the world, bringing goodness and light, and said on the basis of Jesus' goodness, they said 'pray for peace, people, everywhere.'

The star, the song, the shepherd boy, the king – they all point us towards Jesus and ultimately say: "Because Jesus is good, we can pray for peace, everywhere."

The crisis passed without a nuclear strike and this song with its powerful call to prayer has become part of the canon of Christmas songs we hear every year.

So when you hear this song on the radio or on your CD player or Spotify or whatever, here's what I want you to do. Pray for peace and pursue it. Pray for peace and pursue it. Let me unpack those.

Pray for peace.

What else are we going to do? The Bible is clear: peace is possible because Jesus has spiritually speaking united all people before God. According to Ephesians 2, He has made one people out of all the nations of the world and so from His point of view, there is no reason for conflict. We are all equal before God. In a speech after the crisis, JFK said: "So, let us not be blind to our differences--but let us also direct attention to our common interests and to the means by which those differences can be resolved... In the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal."<sup>iv</sup> And I would add, we are all one before God.

The only reason that conflict happens is that one person or nation decides to break that peace that Jesus won. They selfishly decide that they are better than their neighbour and pick the fight that Jesus died to kill. When that happens, we humble ourselves before God, acknowledging that He alone can bring us peace and we pray.

And admittedly, there's a sense in which God is playing the long game. Like we saw last week, true, final, lasting peace will only come when the Prince of peace returns to enforce the peace that He Himself has established.

But still, we pray. We pray that He would intervene. We pray that He would move leaders to seek peaceful resolutions instead of violent ones. We pray that He would protect the vulnerable and weak and those caught in the fallout of war. We pray against thoughtless and meaningless loss of life. We pray that if we HAVE to go to war to preserve justice, that it would be conducted with the most benevolent of motives and actions. We pray that there would be peace.

But we don't just pray for peace, we pursue it. There is a passage of Scripture that has always stuck with me and that's Psalm 34:14: "Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it." Apparently I'm not the only one it's stuck with; Peter quotes it word for word in 1 Peter 3:11.

Because Jesus is good, we pray for peace but we also have a part to play in pursuing, in cultivating it, in living in light of the peace of God every day. Jesus has broken down the dividing walls of hostility between us and our neighbours; if we are His people, it will not do for us to not rebuild those walls. We need to become bridge-builders and peacemakers. How do we do that? I think Peter is onto something when he expands on Psalm 34 –

Finally, all of you, be like-minded and sympathetic, love as brothers, be tenderhearted and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. For,

"Whoever would love life and see good days  
must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech.

He must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it.

Pray for peace and pursue it.

As we close, I want to pick up a thread that I dropped earlier on. We've talked a lot about the king and his call to prayer but I think too we need to consider the shepherd boy. Because he is right on when he says – 'let us bring Him silver and gold.' Jesus deserves all the best. He IS the king, higher than any other authority. Not even death rules over Him.

But let's be honest, what Jesus going to do with silver and gold? He outshines it in every way. Instead, what can we do to honour Him, to worship Him as our Saviour and King? Pray for His peace and pursue it.

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<sup>i</sup> 16 When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. (Mat 2:16 NIV).

<sup>ii</sup> An interview with songwriter Noel Regney's daughter is available here: <https://www.wgbh.org/news/local-news/2019/12/18/do-you-know-the-story-behind-do-you-hear-what-i-hear>

<sup>iii</sup> And it inspired two songwriters to say 'Pray for peace people everywhere.' They wrote this song in the midst of the crisis Noel Regney, the songwriter, was a soldier in the Second World War – he knew the violence and horror of war – as he walked around New York one day he saw babies in strollers – little lambs – and thought 'I don't want them to have to face the horrors that I did.' And he and his wife wrote this song. He and his wife, who were not Christians, looked at Jesus' birth and said 'THERE is reason for hope.' They wrote their own feelings into the words of the king: 'This baby brings us goodness, and because He is good, we can pray that His peace rules over all.'

<sup>iv</sup> John F. Kennedy, June 10, 1963. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/american-university-19630610>

Mr. Regney said in an 1985 interview in The New York, "I wrote it as a clear and plaintive plea for peace at the time of the Cuban missile crisis, in October 1962." His favorite version was Robert Goulet's. "When Mr. Goulet came to the line, "Pray for peace, people, everywhere," he almost shouted the words. I am amazed that people can think they know the song -- and not know it is a prayer for peace. But we are so bombarded by sound and our attention spans are so short that we now listen only to catchy beginnings."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VqtWpyh6naE>