
An Intellectual Sermon at Christmas!?

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
Christmas Eve**

*Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth, peace to people, whom God favors!*

Grace and Glory, Peace and Favor to all of you gathered today, either gathered safely here in the Cathedral, with masks and vaccinations, or gathered in your homes worshipping with us online. Or, maybe, already asleep, gathered with your dreams and hopes for tomorrow!

If you are not asleep yet, my sermon today might well tip the scales over to sleep's favor. Tonight's sermon is an intellectual sermon! Well, at least the preacher thinks it is intellectual. It's the last thing anybody wants for a sermon on Christmas Eve – an intellectual sermon!

Okay, it's not the last thing we want. The last things we want are more covid cases and more pandemic anxiety and more public protocols. But, we've already got them. So, the second worst thing can only be an intellectual sermon, one about thinking and words and translation. Here it is!

It's this curious song. It's this song that the angels sang to some ruddy shepherds out in the fields of Bethlehem so long ago. It's not the kind of song dirty fieldhands usually hear. Shepherds are used to grime and guts – rocks, hills and plains. They are not accustomed to sitting back and listening to Handel's *Messiah*.

But, suddenly here is this heavenly host, a whole choir of angels, singing to them. These weren't the lovely little girl angels of our Christmas Pageant (though those angels are sweet!) These were male and female, mature and strong, forceful and virile and fertile angels. And they had something to say. Something to say that could change the world.

Yes, it's what they said. Yes, it's what they said, and we've gotten wrong ever since. Surely you have heard all the ways those lines have been translated.

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will towards men." That's the way that the King James version of the Bible heard it, and the way Charlie Brown's Christmas heard it later. It's close. But, according to a more careful translation of the Greek, that is not exactly it. The angels were not just proclaiming, in general, "Good will, good will, good will, to all!" It's an excellent sentiment, but it's not exactly it.

Later, some translators came up with the New Revised Standard Version of this verse. It's the one we used tonight here at the Cathedral. And it is awful. It's just not correct. It goes like this: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors." Ugh. It seems selective. Is it saying, "peace only to those God favors?" We are left with that possibility. It's simply a bad translation.

So, here's the boring, intellectual part of tonight's sermon. I present the true translation of Luke 2:14. Surely it is what you've all been waiting for! Luke 2:14 is a song, with two lines. Each of those lines has three parts. In the first line, it's "*Glory in heaven to God.*" And the second line parallels the first. "*Glory in heaven to God,*" and then "*Peace on earth to people.*" ("*Glory in heaven to God; peace on earth to people!*")

And then there's a tag, a beautiful tag, a kind of conclusion, like a phrase following a comma. "*People* (comma)

whom God favors!" That last word indicates "good will," and even "pleasure" or "favor." The angels' song is saying that God has pleasure in people, God favors people, God wills the good for people! It is not saying that God sends peace only to some people, and that only some people are favored.

The verse is saying "Peace on earth to people! God favors all of them! God favors us! God wants the best for us, for all of us!"

So, there is your intellectual, proper, translation of this verse which we have all heard in so many different ways over the years. It should say, "Glory to God in the highest; and on earth, peace to people, whom God favors."

This is the message that the angels sang to dusty and grimy shepherds out in the fields at night. "There is a God filled with glory in the heavens, and that God sends peace into people, all people, whom God loves and favors."

Do you want proof? Do you want a sign? Okay, this will be a sign for you: you will find a child. You may find that child wrapped in bands of cloth lying in a manger. You may find that child in one of the excellent and hard-working hospitals around this city, and around this world.

You may find that child in some slum or rustic lodge. You may find that child in your own neighborhood or down the hall from where you live. You may find that child in your own family gathering, or your friend's gathering.

And, finally, you may find that child in your own heart. You find that child when you hear the angels sing, "Glory to God in the highest; and on earth, peace to people, whom God favors!"

You find that child in your inner child. You are loved. You are favored. You find that child in your heart, when you realize that God's love delivers peace all over again. God's love delivers life all over again. God's love delivers Christmas over and over again, into our lives—like— a renewed birth for us, for every single one of us, over and over again. God's love is new birth.

We are looking for that new birth right now, today, after struggles and laments, hardships and even deaths. We are looking for a sign that love and life can be reborn in us, and in the world. Well, the child is here. The child of peace is born all around us, in the world; and the child of peace is born all inside us, in our hearts. "Peace on earth to people, all people, whom God favors!"

AMEN.

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