

Series: CHRISTMAS...UNWRAPPED—Dec. 18, 2005

**MAKING PEACE
Luke 2:8-14**

INTRO

How many of you speak English as a second language? How many of you speak English as a second language—and it's the only language you know? Just thought I'd ask.

I'm told that English is a very difficult language to learn because of the fact that a lot of words that sound the same or are spelled the same have very different meanings. For example, *where*—as in "where are you going?" and *wear* as in "what are you going to wear"—and "stop asking questions, you're going to wear me out" and *ware* as in hardware.

As I thought about the whole concept of *peace*, I thought about its sound-alike-partner—*piece*. The word *peace* means wholeness; unity. There's peace when there are no relational fractures; when silence is unbroken—uninterrupted, when people work together in unity and cooperation.

A *piece* by definition is a part of something whole that's broken. Things break apart into *pieces*, are blown to *pieces*. Division, by its very nature creates at least two *pieces*.

P-e-a-c-e never, to my knowledge, has violent connotations. The word *piece* can. Think of some of the ways we use it.

- *It was blown to *pieces*.
- *You want a *piece* of me?
- *I'm going to get a *piece* of the action!
- *I gave him a *piece* of my mind!

As I thought about our world—and our need for peace—inner peace, peace with each other, peace between nations, peace in families—I thought, "You know, the real problem is that our world is fragmented. Broken into pieces—smaller and smaller pieces.

Think of what creates a hassle in your life—what steals your peace. It's life that's broken into too many pieces to keep track of—and you lose your sense of wholeness.

And the church has not been a real great example of this. Over the years it's fractured into little warring pieces. I heard a story about 3

guys who were marooned on a deserted island in the South Pacific. Two were Baptists and one was Anglican. When rescuers finally found them 3 years later, they had founded Christ Anglican Church and First Baptist Church and Second Baptist church.

When anything breaks into pieces, PEACE leaks out of it. Marriages get broken into...what? Pieces. Two. Relationships get broken into pieces. And peace, wholeness disappears. Reconciliation means bringing those pieces together—and the result is *peace*.

Right now you may be thinking, “Ken, you *think* too much!” But I believe that sometimes our choices really come down to whether we want peace—wholeness, or we want a *piece*. **Our** piece. Really, the choice is: Peace—Pieces.

How many of you, right now, are listening to a fair amount of Christmas music? A lot of it is about peace. Let There Be Peace on Earth. Peace on Earth. My Grown-up Christmas list.

Our world lives in total contrast to what you hear—and what everyone longs for. People in Iraq who will blow themselves and others up to protest the American presence there. Four peacekeepers held hostage under the threat of death. Absolute chaos in a number of nations—and in the shopping malls. Homes, friendships, neighborhoods split down the middle. And now another election, with four different groups saying, “Choose us! Choose us! Choose us!”

Peace is the ongoing longing, craving, of the human heart. And it’s because that’s what we were made for. Peace. Harmony. Peace of mind. Peace with others. Peace at the core of who we are. Our problem is that we can’t seem to pull it off. Not for long.

Two thousand years ago, someone called the **Prince of Peace** showed up on this planet. The night he was born, angels blazed the message from Heaven that, through this Baby, God was offering peace to all people everywhere. “**Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace to men on whom His favor rests.**” So, why don’t we see it? Why is lasting peace so *rare*?

That’s what I want to talk about. It’s my guess that in one or more areas of your life this morning, you need to find peace—and probably **make** peace. It may be a heart filled with chaos, or wrecked circumstances, or a relationship that’s gone south. And you can be at peace. You can. This 2000 year old announcement is for real.

THE BEST NEWS!

You need to know that any peace in the world when Jesus was born had been forced by the Romans. They called their brutal way of crushing rebellion *pax Romana*. **Roman Peace.** The local ruler, King Herod, installed by Rome, was just as violent. In his paranoia, he'd executed several sons, a couple of wives, and some of his in-laws, without any accountability.

But, as you know, brutality creates an outward veneer of peace, but it just forces hatred underground where it putrefies and mutates into some deeper form of rebellion. And that was Jesus' world. A tired, broken world where people were sick brutality, sick of being pushed around, sick of family quarrels, sick of the tension in the air every time a Roman soldier walked down their street.

Someone had to pay for the occupation—and it wasn't going to be Rome. So, Roman forced conquered countries to pay taxes to support the very soldiers that oppressed. And it was by Roman decree for more efficient taxation that Mary ended up having to make the trip with Joseph to Bethlehem. Historians estimate that Joseph and Mary may have been losing up to 80% of their income in taxes. We think we have it bad! That was how they ended up in Bethlehem, a city jammed with crabby travelers—and this is how Jesus ended up being born in a motel for animals, laid in a feeding trough.

In our day, when royalty is born, announcements are sent to important people. But God didn't send the angels to Caesar or Herod or even the religious hoity-toity of the day. It was shepherds who got the first birth announcement. Let me read the account:

⁸And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests (Luke 2:8-14 NIV)."

Those familiar with shepherding in ancient times are fairly certain that this all happened, not in the winter, but in the spring. Shepherds didn't usually stay with the sheep unless the ewes—female sheep, for you city-slickers—were bearing lambs. That would fit. The Lamb of God who died with the other lambs at Passover—being born at the same time as all the other lambs.

Now, shepherds in that culture would be on about the same socio-economic scale as carnies—carnival ride operators—in ours. They could be pretty rough. This angel that showed up didn't walk out from behind an olive tree and say "Hello!" He lit up the sky and scared them half to death.

This angel says something that you hear through the whole Christmas story. ***Don't be afraid!*** Anyone here ever have fear steal your peace? I have. The angel goes on; in essence saying, "This is a ***great day!*** This is ***good news.*** News that of ***Great joy—for everyone! For all people!***

The heart of the announcement was that everything the world had been hoping for was wrapped up in cloths, lying in a feeding trough in the town of Bethlehem—just minutes away. That was the sign. Think about that for a minute. Find a Savior, the Anointed One, God—lying in a feeding trough in a barn would be a little like finding the Crown Jewels at ***Buck or Two.***

Then the whole sky breaks open, and it's like every angel God has ever created is up there saying, "***Glory to God in the highest.*** And then this: ***And on earth, peace to men on whom his favor rests.***"

News just didn't get any better than this. I'm really not even sure what to compare it to. It's like being out of work and landing your dream job. Having your pediatrician tell you that the life threatening condition your child has is absolutely cured. That the charges against you for driving 120 in a 60 have been dropped.

Imagine living in a nation, getting shoved around by bullies who have proclaimed that their leader is Lord, the Prince of Peace—being humiliated almost every day. And suddenly God shows up and says, "You know the peace you've longed for, the Messiah you're prayed for, the intervention you've sought? The day is here! So, ring every bell! Dance! Be ***really*** glad! Celebrate, give gifts, and take a break from your sorrow and hassle.

There was a very important part of the angel's message that I'll bet the shepherd's missed. The ***good news of great joy*** was for EVERYONE! All people—everywhere. Not just Jews—but also the Romans—the oppressors. Hmmmm?

Now, one of the questions I think people have is—did the announcement come true? Was it authentic--or just wishful thinking on the part of an oppressed people?

One thing we do know—this announcement didn't immediately come true. Herod murdered all the babies under 2 in Bethlehem, trying to kill off the

competition. His three sons who took over his kingdom were almost as bad. Romans continued to crucify thousands of freedom fighters.

And the birth of Jesus, Savior, was like a camera flash going off. Really, really bright for a little while, and then he goes to Nazareth and eventually becomes a construction worker.

It was when Jesus reappeared, 30 years later, that he talked about the Kingdom He'd come to announce and initiate. It would be different than most people thought. He wouldn't nuke the Romans and set up a throne in a palace to rule the world as most Jews thought. He wouldn't bring an era of unprecedented peace and prosperity and joy for Israel. This *really* threw people. They thought, "How could God show up—and it not make any perceivable difference in the status of His people?"

In fact, instead of instituting revolt as a military leader, Jesus told his followers to be peacemakers. It was like the *opposite* of revolt—celebrating wimpy qualities like meekness, gentleness, love and purity. He blessed followers who endured persecution with dignity and courage. He said, "You know how you hate it when Roman soldiers force you to carry their luggage for a mile. Give 'em a freebee. Carry it for two!" Jesus said, "Don't nuke your enemies—*love* them!"

Jesus taught something that sounded *very* weird—to their ears and ours; that the way to peace is not through winning, proving your right, squashing the competition. It's through a *changed heart*; a *heart* that's filled with peace and wholeness. He taught, "You can't *force* people into peace!" That's absolutely true. Look at every war that's been fought—including the one going on right now in Iraq—and you realize that you can force people to sign a peace treaty and lay down their weapons—but the hostility goes on.

The Old Testament called Jesus the *Prince of Peace*. What it clearly meant is that Jesus was the Master—the *Maestro*—of peace and wholeness. He was at peace. He knew what peace meant, what peace took, and how peace worked. And what He would accomplish would bring peace to every person who took Him seriously. His teaching on peace was totally upstream.

He told his followers "Don't stress yourself over money and all it can buy—let God care for you and give you the kind of heart that's filled with contentment."

He told people at war with each other, "Talk frankly with each other and work it out. Value relationships enough to do that a.s.a.p.

He told his followers “Love your enemies. Meet hatred with love and grace.”

He told people bothered by guilty consciences, “Just **own** it. Don’t blame others. And ask for forgiveness.”

It wouldn’t be accurate to portray Jesus as some soft-handed wimp who cried at weddings and bar mitzvahs—and urged people to just let others walk all over them for the sake of peace. This was the same Jesus who called the religious right of his day **hypocrites—a bunch of poisonous snakes**. This was the same Jesus, who made a whip and **drove** a whole army of vendors out of the temple; who deliberately told stories that taunted Herod to come and get him. Jesus had more guts than Arnold Schwarzenegger—but more brains, too. And Jesus knew about peace.

Let me tell you something you may not know about Jesus peacemaking capabilities. In this little band of 12 apprentices he led, Jesus had Matthew, a tax collector, who was the epitome of a traitor to the Jewish people. But he also had Simon the Zealot. Can anyone think of who might be the equivalent of a Simon in our culture? Jesus turned that radically different group into a unified team, more concerned with **God’s** Kingdom, than their little kingdom.

Jesus brought wholeness to broken bodies; hope to parents who had lost children. He calmed every stormy sea he encountered. He even brought peace to the rumbling stomachs of people gathered to hear him teach. To people being eaten alive by guilt—he brought peace. To people whose minds were tied in knots by demonic forces—he brought peace. If people followed him, listened and did what He said—they found peace.

And his followers ultimately conquered the entire Roman Empire without swinging a sword, throwing a spear or shooting an arrow. They did it all with the love and grace and peace He taught.

I would be the first to admit that Jesus’ followers have had a spotty record when it comes to peace. But it’s **always** been when they’ve strayed from everything He was about. The announcement made that night was authentic. And that peace is **yours**. Jesus once said:

28“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30For my yoke is easy and my burden is light (Matt. 11:28-30 NIV).”

But to find the peace and rest, you have to accept his invitation. You have to come to Him, learn from Him—and take his **yoke**—a term well

known in that culture among Rabbis and their students. It meant to live under--follow someone's teaching. Jesus, as God, has all the power and authority to bring peace to us—no matter where we find ourselves.

But there is almost always a price to be paid for peace. I can tell you without any hesitation and without any doubt what the root cause is for every kind of unrest—for every place where there's a lack of peace. It's sin. Think about it.

*What causes wars? Greed, cruelty, unforgiveness, retaliation, and hatred.

*What causes relationships to break down? Betrayal, pride, unforgiveness, greed, jealousy.

*What typically causes the lack of peace we have in our hearts? Guilt over sins that have never been forgiven. Grudges toward others for the ways they've wronged us. Pride, humiliation, discontent and jealousy. Worry over the sickness, trouble, disease and oppression sin has introduced into this world.

The Bible teaches that this little frail baby that wailed that night in the stable grew up. As the Son of God, He got nailed to a cross, and the blood he dripped into the dirt that day paid for all the junk and pain the rebellion and greed and lust and pride and hatred that has wrecked peace now for thousands of years of humanity.

The prophet Isaiah predicted this 800 years before it happened. ***But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed (Is. 53:5 NIV).*** It's only because of Jesus that we can have peace with God. Not just some theory of peace—real peace. Jesus comes through the power of the Spirit into our hearts. When circumstances begin to get us all wound up, all agitated, Jesus whispers, "Its okay! I'm still here—and I'm still the Master of the storm. Any storm! Bring it on!"

When circumstances are wrong—and we're scared, and we've got a bad case of the "*what-ifs*"—Jesus whispers, "What if God were standing beside you right now—with all His power. Would you be afraid? Well--***He is!***

When we're all wound up about something we want—knowing it's going to create chaos in our finances, Jesus whispers, "Think you could leave that with me? And I'll allow you to have it if I want you to? And I'll give you something better for now—***contentment!***"

When you and I are all upset about what someone has done—or neglected to do, or said, or...whatever...Jesus whispers, "Why don't you ***talk*** to them about it—and not just stew over it? Go ahead! I'll

help! Why don't you humble your heart instead of worrying about theirs? Why don't you **overlook** it—like I overlook your junk?"

Jesus offers us this peace. He offers **you** this peace. He invites us to come to Him, to be forgiven, to chill out, to learn patience, to take ourselves less seriously—and take Him **more** seriously. He paid for it with his blood. And it's real. And it's **still** real. Right now. It's actually quite amazing. But you have to actually **come** to Him; **ask** for it.

GIVE THE GIFT OF PEACE!

When I was in college, I had a friend, Steve Weir, who got working with stained glass as a hobby. He tried a couple of simple things—then embarked on this huge stained glass chandelier with every fruit you could think of in it—grapes, apples, pears, peaches.

One night he was working on it as he worked this security guard job for the local newspaper. One of the guys came in and said, "Wow! Can I look at this?" He picked it up—and it slipped out of his hands and smashed all over the cement floor. Steve said this guy stared at the mess for a minute—and then burst into tears because he'd just destroyed who knows how many hours of work.

As I thought to myself about how I could send you home with a visual of what peace in this world looks like apart from God—that's it. God holds everything in his hands. When it gets out of His hands, the **peace** shatters into **pieces**. I don't have a priceless chandelier to demonstrate that with—so I'll use this puzzle.

When all the pieces are there, it creates a picture. It makes sense. If you drop it, the pieces go everywhere. Now, I'm not sure how consistently this image works—but I'm going to give it a shot. The whole problem started in this world when we rebelled, yanked our hearts out of God's sovereign domain, and decided that we would just do our own thing.

The Bible says that God is the One who holds everything together. What happens when things get yanked out of God's hands? **Pieces**—not **peace**. The Kingdom Jesus came to bring basically means everything being under His rule; His leadership. He's the one who brings all the pieces together into one whole—**peace**.

The basic peace-wrecker in the world is rebellion. We can't have peace with God when we cling to our own little piece of life, our own little kingdom, pull it away from God and say, "It's **mine!**" I'll tell you what wrecks our peace with God. It's when, in our rebellion, we cling to our little piece of life, our little

kingdom—and refuse to give it back to God as one piece of something much, much bigger.

When it comes to peace, we're schizophrenic. Listen to Christmas music, and it will give you an idea of just how schizophrenic we are. I have a CD that illustrates this *perfectly*. There's this beautiful song pleading for peace—you know, the one with Bing Crosby and David Bowie, *Peace on Earth*. The very next song is *Santa Baby* with Eartha Kitt! We say we *want* peace, more than anything; but we want it on *our* terms.

We lose our peace in our circumstances, when we clutch our little broken piece of reality—and refuse to do what God says to do with worry--release it into His hands so He can give us peace.

We lose our peace in relationships—sometimes because we're trying so hard to hold onto the little pieces of our ego, our need to be right, our grudges—and we'd rather live in chaos than say something simple like, "I'm sorry. I was wrong. I love you—and I don't want to live like this." God asks us to forgive. He suggests that we release people into his hands for Him to deal with in His way—and we don't want to.

We lose our peace with our money when we clutch it and hold onto it for dear life. Instead of saying, "This all belongs to God—it's just been loaned to me to see how I'll handle it" we say, "It's *mine!* The only way someone's gonna get a piece of it is if they pry it out of my cold dead hands!"

Now, I realize this doesn't explain everything. But I do know this, foundational to having any kind of lasting peace is understanding that wholeness is only found in God, His ownership, His rule, His power, His authority, and His life. And Jesus, the *Prince of Peace*, the *Maestro* has made possible for us to have peace with God, to become His friend, to become part of His bigger reality and bigger purpose—and *become* a bigger person.

I personally think the price tag for hanging on to our stuff, our grudges, our right to mouth off and save our pride is too high. We pay for these pieces with our *peace*. The question is—is it worth it? Is your little broken *piece* of whatever worth your *PEACE!*

Jesus paid a high price for our peace. We whine about it, sing about it, long for it—but ultimately, it is in our hands. The angels were right; *Glory to God in the highest, and PEACE to men on earth, on whom his favor rests*. He chose—now we choose.

And our choice says volumes about us. I recently heard a story about this guy who was coming up to a stop light—and it turned yellow, so he stopped at the crosswalk—even though he could've made it through. Well, the woman who had been tailgating him totally lost it. She began screaming at him and shaking her fist in frustration. While she was still ranting and raving and carrying on, she looked out her window into the face of a very serious police officer. He ordered her to get out of the car, and then took her to the police station where she was searched, photographed, finger-printed and put in a jail cell.

A couple of hours later, an officer came and escorted her back to the place where she had been booked. The arresting officer gave her back her property. He said, "I'm sorry for the mistake, Ma'am, but as I was behind you watching you flipping off and screaming at the guy in front of you, I noticed the **Choose Life** license plate holder, the **What Would Jesus Do** bumper sticker and the chrome-plated fish symbol on your trunk lid. Surely you can understand why I assumed that you'd stolen the car."

Have you ever met someone who brings chaos and unrest wherever they go? They walk into a room, and in minutes they've got people all churned up—some wanting to kill them.

Sometimes people don't bring chaos—they're hand-wringers; fear-mongers, and they load every group they're in with fear and worry.

You and I always bring something with us into every room we enter. So, why not bring the gift of peace? Jesus said to a group of followers who were about to go through an extremely rough time, ***Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid (John 14:27 NIV).***

Know what I think? I think it's very difficult to be a peacemaker if you don't have peace yourself. I'll bet some of you would like some peace this Christmas, wouldn't you?

It could be that your unrest is due to the fact that you don't know what your life is all about. You're trying to earn God's favor and other's approval, and you live with this nagging sense of guilt—and it's always churning down inside. Jesus came and **died** to bring you peace. Would you like the peace of knowing that you're forgiven, that that past is behind you, and there is a Heavenly Father who will **never** stop loving you? That's **yours** for the asking. Right now.

It could be this morning that you're really worried about your money, your job, your future, your success—and it has you tied in knots. Jesus said

that you and I don't have to live in the worry and anxiety of the world system. The question is, will you put the little kingdom you're trying to run in his hands? Will you?

Maybe you're tied in knots over a heartbreaking situation you're in—mainly because it doesn't make sense to you, and your peace is based on you knowing—or thinking you know the future. My question is, will you let the One who actually knows the future **and** holds it—hold **you**. Will you trust that, because He's God—nothing is impossible with him, and He'll take care of you?

As I thought about this whole deal, I realized that you and I have the power, as followers of Jesus, to be **PIECE-makers** or **PEACE-makers**. It pretty much depends on who we follow and listen to. Satan is the lord of chaos, division, anarchy, brokenness, unforgiveness, hatred and jealousy.

Jesus is the Lord, the Prince of Peace—the founder of love, joy, kindness, patience, perseverance and self-control. The peace He offers to me, to you, to all humankind, to this world is real. But, **but...**to find peace, we have to turn in our pieces. His Kingdom...my kingdom-ette. His grace...my revenge. Wholeness—or brokenness. Peace...or pieces.

The gift of peace may be the nicest, most thoughtful, most valuable gift you give this Christmas. Maybe it's by, with God's help, bringing peace to the rooms you walk into instead of friction, bad words, and controversy.

Maybe it's by offering **the olive branch** to someone you've been at war with. Being the first to say, "I'm sorry"—or, at least, "You know, I **could** be wrong!"

It could be that you and God need to deal with the fear you carry everywhere with you. Did you know that the Bible says 366 times, "Do **not** be afraid!" - One for every day of the year plus leap year.

Maybe it's going into family settings with a load of peace in your heart instead of loaded guns.

It could be that, to have peace and offer peace, the big thing you have to do is forgive—just let a grudge go that begs you to nurse it and feed it. Let it go.

PEACE CARRIES A PRICE

No one realized that night in the field what was really going on in Heaven. They had no idea that their gain—their Savior—the peace God was offering to us—had

an immense price tag. The Son was laying aside his rights as God, coming to a filthy manger—and it took unbelievable humility. But He was descending into greatness!

Do you want peace? How **badly** do you want it? God wanted it enough humble Himself and give His life. Surely peace would be worth whatever little chunk of whatever you may be holding onto. With the authority of God behind me, I need to tell you, **Peace** is right in front of you--within your reach. Don't miss it.