Sermon for Christmas Eve

December 24, 2023

Luke 2:1-20

There’s an old joke that goes something like, A panda walks into a café. He orders a sandwich, eats it, then draws a gun and fires two shots in the air.

"Why?" asks the waiter, as the panda heads towards the exit. The panda pulls out a badly punctuated wildlife manual and tosses it over his shoulder. "See for yourself."

The waiter opens the book to the ‘panda’ entry and reads, "*Panda. Large black-and-white bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves.*"

It’s a favorite of English teachers to show their students that proper punctuation is an important part of communicating information.

Punctuation wasn’t widely used until the invention of the printing press. And it barely existed in the time when the Bible was being written. Which means that, for the last 500 years or so, translators have had to make decisions about punctuation in addition to all the other things they have to think about as they do their work.

The choices they make matter more than we might realize. It can change how we understand a verse. Like Luke 2:14 – “Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among humans with whom God is pleased.”

Without at least one comma somewhere in the midst of those words, it’s not just hard to read in one breath. It’s vague. Where is the glory? Just in the highest heaven? Or on earth, too? Is God pleased with *all* people? Or is God only pleased with *some* people?

I *migh*t have a tendency to overthink things sometimes.

Still. Punctuation matters here. Because there have certainly been those who would place a comma in a way that suggests that God is only pleased with *some* people. Which gave permission to others to offer *their* opinions about what we have to be like in order for God to be pleased with us.

And, in the process, some people absorbed the message that they’d never be good enough for God. They’d never be worthy of God’s love. They’d always be beyond God’s grace.

But notice verse 10. The angel tells the shepherds that the good news of great joy being given is for *all the people*.

In that moment, that meant the shepherds and their families. Mary and Joseph, and their families. And all the Israelites.

And the Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus. And Herod, king of Judea. And all of the Roman soldiers who enforced the peace, often in brutal ways.

How much do we want to think about *them* being people God was pleased with? Not a lot, probably.

But if we use God’s love for all that God has created as our lens for reading Scripture – which is admittedly hard to do sometimes – it helps.

If we remember that God created humanity in God’s own image, it helps. Because it reminds us that *all* of us are capable of bearing witness to God’s love.

And, let’s face it, ***none*** of us pull that off ***all*** the time.

But does that mean God isn’t pleased with us?

It would hardly be good news for ***all*** people if God’s favor was conditional upon us perfectly loving our neighbor as God loves us in **every** moment of **every** day.

The big question, then, is *why* would God be pleased with someone?

Is God pleased with us because of what we do, or is God pleased with us simply because we *exist*?

If the good news is, as the angel says, for *all* people, then I can’t help but think that God is pleased with us simply because we exist. That God loves us even if God doesn’t like some of the choices we make.

Which is good news of great joy if you feel shame about your past. If you’ve made mistakes. If you’ve heard that you have to fit a certain mold, not think or do “bad things,” or God might just turn away from you. *For all eternity.*

The angel’s message is for *all people,* making it is good news of great joy, because it means God’s love is there for ***all*** of us. God’s grace is a gift freely offered to all people.

There’s room in God’s house, room at the table. For everyone.

Does that feel fair? Maybe not.

But God’s love is wider and deeper than we can possibly imagine. God became incarnate, took on human form, to show us the possibilities when we lean into that love. To show us what that love looks like in action. So that all the world might be saved.

Our sacred work is not to shame others, to scold others, to judge others.

Our sacred work is to allow that love to so fill our hearts that it heals our brokenness, and then share that love so that all people are loved into wholeness.

May the light of God’s love fill your heart this Christmas and always.