

“Good will to men”  
Luke 2:14c  
Advent Midweek III  
December 20, 2023

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text and the focus of our meditation this Advent midweek season, the song of the angels on Christmas night... this evening, the final phrase of the refrain: “good will to men.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Two-thirds of the way through this Advent’s meditation upon an oh-so-familiar Song of the Season, I wouldn’t blame you if you said, “Well, some nice meditation on things I’ve heard before and know well... perhaps a little depth to it I hadn’t appreciated before, but nothing earth-shattering.” I wouldn’t blame you. The refrain is so well-loved, we *should* be familiar with all that we’ve so far considered, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace!” And, honestly, if we’re sticking with and remaining faithful to the Scriptures, then the meditation shouldn’t be all that earth-shattering!

But, that assumes our English has stuck close to the Scriptures. So, what do you do with the last phrase: as we know it and sing it (flowing out of the second phrase) “and on earth peace, good will to men.”

But that doesn't sound like the ESV translation at all: "and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased." What happened to those words we know so well? Why would our hymnal use "good will toward men" when it appears the word "good will" is nowhere to be found in the phrase "among those with whom He is pleased"? – which sounds like the goodness comes from certain men! Let's meditate properly on this final phrase as it ties together the whole angelic hymn like one nice Christmas bow.

In the Greek, the phrase is a mere three words: "εν ανθρωποις ευδοκιας." The first two words you can probably figure out pretty easily – εν means "in, among" and ανθρωποις (like "anthropology") means "men, people." It's the third word that needs so much attention: ευδοκιας. And, guess what ευδοκιας means: "good will."

Now, wait a minute? Didn't we just say the ESV interprets it "among those with whom He is pleased." If ευδοκιας means "good will", then where did the phrase "with whom He is pleased" come from?

It comes from the fact that – as I said in the first week – we should consider this hymn to be *two* phrases, not three... the whole second phrase being "and on earth, peace among those with whom He is pleased" **or** "and on earth, peace (which is)

God's good will to men." In other words, the good will is to be understood as relating to and flowing from God, to *and through* men... the peace and unity and wholeness that comes from the good news of the Christ child. Those who rejoice in this peace of 'God and sinners reconciled' live daily life in the safety of God's goodwill toward them in Christ Jesus **and** live daily life as those with whom God is pleased because of Christ Jesus and their faith in him (and, thus, their love of one another).

In fact, this two-for-one phrase (trying to determine if this is *God's* good will toward men, or *their* good will toward one another, with which God is pleased) this wrestling can also be captured by asking whether it is God's good will to men, or God's good will among men ("among those with whom He is pleased"). And, of course, the answer is *YES*. It's both.

It's both because it's really a phrase that speaks to the daily life of the Church at peace with God... and that daily life is one lived both in **justification** (God's good will *to* men) and in **sanctification** (God's good will *among* men who are at peace with Him and therefore one another). The justification can be heard in the final verses of our office hymn, "All My Heart Again Rejoices," as we sang, "Jesus calls one and all, 'You are safe from danger. Children, from the sins that grieve you, you are freed!' – that's justification! And the **sanctification** can be heard in the final

verse: “Come, then, banish, all your sadness! One and all, great and small, come with songs of gladness.”

But, without the justification (God’s good will *to* men), there can be no sanctification (God’s good will *among* men). But, in the safety of justification (God’s good will *to* men), there must be sanctification – it’s a given as a natural consequence and outflowing: God’s good will *among* men.

Those who care not about the justification see “good will” as earthly charity. For example, anyone can dump off their junk at a store and “feel pleased with themselves for the good will they have toward their fellow man.” Even our own Old Adam thinks that way... Christians, too, can (and must repent of) artificial good will... that which looks good on the surface, but flows from a faithless heart concerned only of self-benefit, self-convenience, self-pride.

But that’s not true sanctification. Only in seeing God’s good will toward us in the Christ child born for the cross may we properly understand and live with Christian “good will among men.”

It’s not unlike when St Paul speaks of the Spirit (capital “S”) **creating** faith (good will to men) then working **with** our faith (good will *among* men with whom He is pleased)... *the* Spirit working with *our* spirit (lower-case “s”) Paul says to the Romans,

“For you did not receive a spirit of slavery that returns you to fear, but you received *the Spirit* (capital S) of sonship, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit himself (capital S) testifies with our spirit (lower case S) that we are God’s children.”

And those who are God’s children are both those who rejoice at the good news of the incarnate Christ and, therefore, love one another with the love that is from that incarnate Christ.

So, is it any wonder that a society that has convinced itself the birth of the Christ child is a fictional seasonal tale is the same society descending into chaos, strife, and bitterness? How can there be divine good will among men (sanctification) if there is no foundational certain hope in God’s good will toward each man (justification)? And, of course, that justification of the sinner – that ‘God and sinners reconciled’ (we said last week) – is achieved by the Christ making peace by the blood of His cross. The whole world that rejects that Christ upon the cross takes no proper comfort in the Christ in the manger. And the world that takes no proper comfort in the Christ in the manger (and, therein, God’s good will to men incarnate) has no ability (it’s not a matter of *desire*, has no ability) to share that divinely-incarnate good will incarnationally among themselves. This is why you are called the light of the world, for you have the ability to confess to the world

the truth of the One whose Light breaks the darkness. You have been gifted that ability in the faith of justification planted in your heart.

But, among those who sit in darkness, as much desire as they may have to bring peace on earth, they haven't the ability. As we heard last week, "There is no peace for the wicked" ... so also, "there is no good will among the wicked." To be sure, politeness can still be found. Human philosophical good will can be found. But the εὐδοκίας, that flows from God's good will to men, such cannot be found among the world of unbelievers, and is certainly even threatened whenever believers are tempted to not confess the Light of Christ before the world or even repent among one another (that, too, is God's good will), but tempted to remain in fear, ashamed of the good news... or in sinful impenitence, stubbornness, and bitterness of believers.

Certainly, Christ entered the world for the sake of the whole world; but the good will of God toward all mankind is known and appreciated and cherished and adored only by those who worship the Christ child and rejoice in the justification He brings to the manger and, one day, to the cross. Only those who hope in Him truly rejoice with the angels and join their refrain, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, God's good will to / among men."

And, as they rejoice at the news of the Christ child, then the refrain comes to its full meaning, “among those with whom He is pleased.” Pleased, not because of their righteous worship, but because of the Christ child’s righteousness, which they know covers their sin and thus, they can have a clear conscience before God and toward one another, peace with one another, charity toward one another, good will toward one another, true love for one another. Yes, with these God is pleased to dwell; for them He has become Immanuel; and in the Christ of God’s good favor, they too are named and accounted “men of good favor” (that’s another way this phrase is sometimes translated) – men of God’s favor, as we heard in the first reading... men of God’s favor, to rejoice with one another and love one another equally as “men of God’s good favor.”

This is not unlike Simeon. Remember Simeon in the temple, awaiting the Christ child... described as a man of God’s favor... not because of his great righteousness, but because Simeon was longing for and his whole life hoped in and depended upon the Lord’s Christ. And, when the Lord’s Christ came into the temple as a little child, Simeon took him in his arms and this man of God’s **good will** sang of what? – **peace** and **glory** (just as the Christmas angels sing of glory, peace, good will!). Simeon of God’s **favor** sang: “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in

**peace**... for my eyes have seen your salvation, that you have prepared ... the **glory** of your people Israel.”

Yes, the people of God know that those three terms of the angels’ song – glory, peace, good will – they always belong together, don’t they? Even as the Lord gathers His Church around the incarnate Christ no longer at the manger or the cross, but at the altar and for the Supper – does it not bring him **glory** in the highest, does it not bless us, just as the pastor proclaims: “the **peace** of the Lord be with you always;” does it not send us on our way with strength for God’s **good will** among us in fervent love toward one another as those who mutually live safely in His **good will** toward us?

God’s **glory** *in the highest and to the utmost*, **peace** *between God and man*, and God’s **good will** *to and among* His people... and it all depends upon the little Child in the manger, for in the little Child God’s promises have come to pass, His covenant with His people has been made manifest, He has indeed proven that we are His people, and He is our God.

And, now, to conclude meditation upon this Song of the Season, you can look at the whole hymn and see a most beautiful reality regarding this hymn of the angels to their God and ours ... and a beautiful reason to not quibble about whether this two-phrased hymn can also be seen as a three-phrased hymn.



Because we now understand the third phrase as a description of the work of the Spirit with our spirit, can we not notice that the first phrase sings of the Glory that belongs to God who designed this plan (we might think of the term “Father”) and the second phrase – “and on earth peace” – is only properly known in the Son making peace by the blood of His cross. And so, on Christmas night and forevermore, the angels sing a Trinitarian refrain which informs or ‘puts meat on the bones’ (as the detail/theology behind) our simple doxology: “Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.” Yes, Glory be to our Triune God... that is the forever-after doxology... but, as the Word made flesh was unveiled that night, perhaps so also was the doctrinal context to our doxological praise, that we may forever after use this Song of the Season to understand *why* we sing a high doxology to God... for, as He has in history planned and orchestrated it through His Messiah, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, God’s good will to and among men.”

In the Name of the Father  
And of the Son  
And of the Holy Spirit.  
+ AMEN +

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