

SERMON

I.

Christmas has so many little pieces that are important, no matter how small. Every parent has tried to assemble a toy that has six bags of tiny pieces and an instruction manual with forty-seven separate steps. Add an eager four-year-old helping to open those bags and spread out those parts, and you've got the excitement of Christmas.

It's easy to lose a piece or two in all that. Cover everything with a layer of crumpled Christmas wrapping paper and many a piece could end up in the recycling bin. It is often the piece that's really needed, the very center of the toy.

But what if the missing piece is more than that one tiny square of plastic? What if it's a diamond just given in an engagement ring with all the promises of love and life together? What if that diamond is suddenly missing from the ring? Somehow it fell out of the setting and is lost among all the paper, boxes, plastic, and directions. *Stop everything and start looking! We need to find that diamond!*

That's our situation on Christmas. Christmas comes with God's wonderful news of a lasting relationship—the peace that joins us with Him for all time. In all the excitement of Christmas, we might miss that diamond and have only the outward setting but not the treasure of His love and peace. We can find many small pieces this Christmas, but only one piece, one treasure, is needed.

That's what completes our star of peace. We've walked through Advent with the five points of the star, seeking peace in so many directions. We've imagined that peace can be found if we get enough possessions, or peace might come if we can escape to a far-away retreat or lock our past equally far away. We've tried to find peace in having control of our world, and we've tried to find our purpose in directing others. But in every case, God stops us before we go too far on a hopeless tangent. At each point of the star, God gives us His own distinct peace. Left to ourselves, we would go off on a search that would never end. There will never be enough stuff or distance or control. But with Him, we find peace here and now.

II.

That's especially true today. Our peace is in the treasure in the manger. When we highlight the center of our Christmas star, the star becomes a picture of the manger. In the center of that manger is the diamond of His gift. Finding peace is not seeking a needle in a haystack. Peace is finding the diamond of God's Son in the straw of the manger. That diamond is the infant Son of God. He isn't lost in the manger. He purposely made the manger His home so He could be found.

Who else would do this but God? We treasure our important gifts and know where they are. I can't imagine a young woman who has just gotten

her engagement ring on Christmas Eve would lose it. She's not taking it off or risking any harm to it. Don't ask her to wash the dishes tonight. That diamond is the center of her world, and she's keeping it safe.

God's treasure has come to be the center of our world. What a wonder that our God puts the center of the universe, His Son, into the setting of the manger and stable. He doesn't put Him safely in the Most Holy Place in the Jerusalem temple. He doesn't place Him, like a diamond set in gold, on the throne of the king. He doesn't have Him hover above us. All of those would make sense as the greatness of this gift should be seen and protected. The Son of God coming to the world rightly comes with the brilliant light of the glory of God and the chorus of angels singing. It is right that shepherds—along with us—hear them and are stunned by that brightness and the message of a Savior born to the world.

But that outward glory is brought into one small, almost-hidden spot—the manger within the stable. There we find the great gift of peace, like a diamond set within the arms of the manger. We have looked often at the star as it promises different points and directions of peace, far away places, control, rewriting our past, but it is not a tangent of distance and discovery that brings us peace. Peace is the diamond held within the manger. That infant Son of God, so small that He could be ignored by many, is our hope for peace.

To make sure that we find this treasure, let's take the journey of the shepherds in our text. They heard the news of the birth and must have

dashed off to find the stable and manger. Now let's picture them as they came to the stable, perhaps led by the sound of a baby within. What a moment as they suddenly filled the doorway and saw Mary, Joseph, and the baby. I doubt that Mary and Joseph had any warning that the shepherds were coming. The peace of those first moments with their Son must have been heavenly, given the long journey and the difficulty of finding a place to rest. But now the birth is done, and their Son is with them. Ah, rest and peace at last.

But not for long! Suddenly, there were shepherds, rough-clothed men, breathless from a race down the hills. They filled the doorway, jostling a bit to get the best view. Imagine their questions and excitement. They may have asked, "He's the One? Do you know who He is? Do you know what we've just heard? Angels, a whole sky full of them!" Oh, the stories they could tell one another. Mary likely told of the angel Gabriel, and Joseph could recount dreams that reassured him. The shepherds could then recall every word of the angel's message and the whole choir's song.

III.

We're invited to hear that story again today just as we have every Christmas. Perhaps we are like the shepherds who filled the stable that night. I expect that all of them wanted to get inside the stable, no matter how crowded. I wonder if they held the infant Jesus. Mary carefully handing the infant Jesus into the arms of a shepherd is quite a picture for us to ponder. Shepherds were rough-handed men, but they knew how to

hold infant lambs. Now picture one holding the newborn Lamb of God, the very Son of God. As he held the infant, did he speak to Him, telling Him of the angels that had sung? But before he can tell the whole story, another shepherd nudges him and says it's his turn. Let every shepherd have his moment with the Child, a moment that will last a lifetime.

We can be in that picture. Put yourself in the back row of the shepherds, one of the last to squeeze into the stable. Eventually, the first ones must slip out the door, and we are the ones left with Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. That's Christmas worship—taking the place of the shepherds, being the next generation to fill the stable and to hold the infant in our minds. It's endless patience on His part that lets each of us have our long and lasting Christmas moment.

Remember how we turned the star of peace into the manger in our illustration today? But now, the arms of the manger are briefly replaced. The arms of the manger are now your arms as you hold the infant Savior. Look at Him and see the gift of peace that the angels declared. Here is peace to the world, not a mere wish, but the living Child who caused His birth in this way. He came so that He could be held in the arms of the manger, the arms of His mother, the arms of the shepherds, and the arms of all people.

Holding the Son born today is the enduring gift of Christmas peace. We'll shake out the wrapping paper in case something is still hidden there. Let the paper go but keep the bows for another year. Most of the parts for

the toys will be found. Eventually, the toys will be assembled and look pretty much like the pictures on the boxes. The many parts of Christmas will be put away, and the important pieces will remain.

That is especially true of the gift of Christmas, the Savior, and the peace that He brings. In all our pursuit of peace, He is always God's answer. He is the peace that passes our understanding, but He is also the peace that perfectly understands us since He came to be one of us. His peace ends our hopeless pursuits for possessions and power. His peace is the Lamb of God held by shepherds, the infant Son in His mother's arms, and that same Savior held by us. Here is the gift of God, the diamond of His relationship with us, and the treasure in the arms of the manger. Amen.