

## **“Singing after God’s Pleasure”**

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*A Reflection for Christmas Eve*

Luke 2:1-20

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For me, the classic telling of the Christmas story belongs to Linus. It’s just after Charlie Brown and Linus have returned from the tree lot . . . with *that* tree.

Here is what happens.

You can watch the clip here: <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CojUP5nRidA">www.youtube.com/watch?v=CojUP5nRidA</a>
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*Girls:* You’re hopeless Charlie Brown, completely hopeless.

*Charlie:* Rats!

*Lucy:* You’ve been dumb before, but this time you really did it.

*[Children and Snoopy laugh, exit. Charlie is alone by piano. Linus approaches.]*

*Charlie:* I guess you were right Linus; I shouldn’t have picked this little tree. Everything I do turns into a disaster. I guess I really don’t know what Christmas is about. Isn’t there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?

*Linus:* Sure, Charlie Brown. I can tell you what Christmas is all about.

*[Linus goes to center stage]*

*Linus:* Lights please. *[spotlight comes on Linus.]*

*“And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you. Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in the manger.’ And suddenly, there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on Earth peace, good will toward men.’”*

*[Linus picks up blanket, walks back to Charlie.]*

*Linus:* That’s what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown.

II

An army of angels celebrates: “*Glory to God in the highest, and on Earth peace, good will toward . . .*” Well, toward whom?

Linus was remembering the venerable King James Bible translation, which says “*good will toward ‘men.*” These days that’s archaic, but the King James folks meant everyone. Peace and good will for everyone.<sup>1</sup>

But people who know a lot more than I do about Greek translations and ancient manuscripts say that’s not quite right. What those quaking-in-their-sandals shepherds heard was more like this:

*“Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth, peace among those with whom he is pleased.”<sup>2</sup>*

God’s peace is for those with whom God is pleased? Who are they? Why is God pleased with them? Is Jesus only good news for those who are good with God?

“*Peace among those with whom God is pleased*” might be more accurate. But I’m not sure I like it so much.

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<sup>1</sup> The Greek word that lies behind the translations is *anthropos*, which is a gender-neutral term for people.

<sup>2</sup> I’m quoting the English Standard Version. The NIV translates it as “peace to those on whom his favor rests” while the NRSV has “peace among those whom he favors!” The source of the differences lies in a textual variant among the most ancient manuscripts. For more information, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annunciation\\_to\\_the\\_shepherds#Translational\\_issues](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annunciation_to_the_shepherds#Translational_issues)

III

I need God's peace: peace that spreads far and penetrates deep; peace that ceases conflicts without and within; peace that reconciles the hateful and vindicates the harmed; peace that lifts up the trampled-down; peace that fills tummies aching for food and cures bodies aching for health; peace that stops the terror of tyrants and stills the blabbering of blowhards; peace that sets things right because so much is wrong. God's peace. I need it. You need it. We all need it together.

But God's peace is "*among those with whom God is pleased.*" Sigh.

Maybe it's because I'm still thinking of Charlie Brown.

*"You're hopeless, completely hopeless, Charlie Brown."*

*"You've been dumb before, but this time you really did it, Charlie Brown."*

Then the laughter, the burning arrows of laughter. All the kids! Even his dog!

It's so hard to measure up to expectations. Not just the shopping and decorating. The most important stuff, the "parent, spouse, and friend" stuff, the "do unto others as I would have them do to me" stuff, the "loving my neighbour" stuff, the "loving God," stuff. How am I doing at all that, with my words and actions? How about in my thoughts, my feelings, my soul? Can I measure up? Make God pleased?

Maybe God could lower his standards? At least to my level. That would be nice. But why my level? Besides, my sense is the world needs more love and service, more justice and peacemaking. Higher standards, not lower.

Am I one with whom God is pleased?

Is anyone?

Is the angels' chorus good news at all?

#### IV

Jump past the Christmas story. Baby Jesus is now a grown man. We're at the Jordan River. Listen:

*. . . when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."*<sup>3</sup>

Jesus is God's pleasure.

Jesus — from his birth in Bethlehem, through his baptism, his serving and teaching, his healing and forgiving, his challenging and comforting, to his death on a cross and resurrection from the tomb, his ascension into the heavenly realm and his presence with us by the Spirit — Jesus is God's pleasure.

Jesus is the fullness of God with us. And, Jesus is the fullness of us with God. Jesus perfectly lives God's love for us. He perfectly lives the love we are made, called, and expected to live for each other. And he perfectly lives the love we are made, called and expected to live for God. With love so completely human, Jesus loves God with his devotion, with his complete openness, with his trust and his self-giving. With so amazingly divine, Jesus loves us with his devotion, openness, trust and self-giving.

Jesus is God's pleasure. With him, God is pleased.

Here is the good news, the glad tidings of great joy: as Jesus saves and redeems us, as he calls us and brings us into himself . . . belonging to Jesus, we share in that pleasure of God that is his. Because of Jesus' life for us, God is pleased with us.

*Charlie Brown, you're hopeless, completely hopeless. . . . Yes, but my hope is not in me. It is in Christ Jesus.*

*Charlie Brown, you've been dumb before, but this time you really did it. . . . Yes, but how much more has Christ Jesus done for me.*

*The burning laughter of mockery . . . but listen . . . it's being drowned out by the laughter of angels, singing out the good news. "Peace among those with whom God is pleased!" Because of Jesus, you are God's pleasure, God's delight, God's child, God's victory, and God's peace. Because of Jesus, "Glory to God in the highest!"*

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 3:21-22 (ESV).