

“CHRISTMAS PEACE”

a sermon on Isaiah 11:1-10, Romans 15:4-13, and Matthew 3:1-12
December 4, 2016 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
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The year was 1863. These United States were nothing of the kind. We were a nation divided. At war. From his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow may have been removed geographically from the battlefield. But he was most certainly *affected* by it. In the Spring of that year, without his permission or blessing, Longfellow’s youngest son, Charles, had joined the Union Army.

Just months later, on December 1st, Longfellow received word that Charles had been severely wounded in battle – and that as the bullet had crossed his spine, he would quite possibly be paralyzed for life.

Not only that, but Longfellow was still grieving the recent tragic death of his beloved wife, Frances, whose dress had caught fire while in their home as she was sealing a packet containing locks of her children’s hair with wax from a lighted candle. Longfellow was there, and threw himself on her eventually squelching the flames, but not before also severely burning *himself*. Frances lived through the night, but died the next morning.

On Christmas morning of 1863, grieving the loss of his wife, unsure about the future of his son, not to mention the nation that he loved, and for which he had been in constant prayer for a peaceful solution and resolution, the old poet penned the words that have become our beloved carol, *I heard the Bells on Christmas Day*. And knowing the setting lends so much more meaning to his words:

“I heard the bells on Christmas Day, Their old, familiar carols play, and wild and sweet, The words repeat, Of peace on earth, good-will to men!”

And thought how, as the day had come, The belfries of all Christendom, Had rolled along, The unbroken song, Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till ringing, singing on its way, The world revolved from night to day, A voice, a chime, A chant sublime, Of peace on earth, good-will to men!”

Beautiful words about the “spirit of Christmas.” But then the poem shifts to the present reality of the nation at war: “It was as if an earthquake rent, The hearth-

stones of a continent, And made forlorn, The households born, Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head; "There is no peace on earth," I said; "For hate is strong, And mocks the song, Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

All through this past Fall, we've been encountering writings of the Old Testament prophets – often words of pain and judgment, *always* words filled with *passion* – boldly expressing the prophets' love of their nation and people, juxtaposed with the nations' present realities of warfare, and strife, as well as tragedies of a natural sort, like plagues and droughts.

But now, in Advent, we come to the passages of the prophecies that are so incredibly hopeful, they begin to sound like pure "fantasy." I noted last week that if Isaiah was sure of *anything*, he was sure that in the restoration, there would be *peace* – peace so secure that people could beat the swords into plows, and their spears into pruning hooks. But now, he goes even further, with words of wolves and lambs, dwelling together peacefully, and children playing at the holes of snakes without any need to fear. Wow.

And so, on the one hand, it would be easy to conclude that the prophets – and Isaiah, maybe in *particular* – were just "dreamers." *Unrealistic*. They spoke of a peace that our logical minds tell us will *never* come, in this life. Every time we seem to be making a bit of progress toward "world peace," that progress is followed by at *least* one step in the other direction.

If our recent national election demonstrated nothing else, it demonstrated that contrary to what some have been proclaiming in recent years, we are a *deeply* divided nation.

"Peace" is our word for the day on this Second Sunday of Advent. Jesus came into the world to bring "peace on earth." But with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who would not agree that there really *is no* peace on earth?

Peace. In Hebrew, *shalom*. It means so many things. The absence of earthly warfare, to be sure. But also something *deeper*.

And I think the *brilliance* of the prophetic word is that it gives us the opportunity to *relish* in our thoughts of the world as we would have it be, as we know that God intended it, *even as we live in the world as it now exists*. The *result* of which, is our "having" peace, even where it *doesn't* exist tangibly.

Prophetic peace. Christmas peace. It isn't peace that *exists*, exactly. But it is peace that is nevertheless *real*. It is the peace of *faith*. The peace that we *know* exists, because everything we believe *points* to it, even in the midst of everything (or some things) around us saying otherwise.

Paul's vision of peace was largely about human reconciliation – specifically, in Christ, God's reconciliation of not just the Jews, but also the Gentiles, meaning *everyone else*. In its own way, it was nearly as radical a thought as wolves lying down with lambs. And historically, at least to date, just as unattainable.

But that didn't keep Paul from *dreaming* about it, trusting in it, and working for it, even in the very midst of the ongoing painful *divisions* that existed between the Romans and both Jews *and* Christians in his day. And not just dreaming, but *acting*. Listen again to his words, motivated and justified by means of a *litany* of Old Testament quotes from the law, the Psalms, and the prophetic writings:

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs.

Those words were not written from the perspective of one who currently *lived* in a world in which living “in harmony with one another” was the reality. But the mere *thought* of it – and his trust in its eventual fulfillment – is what gave Paul the strength to carry on, and “run the race.”

Longfellow's poem speaks of the utter despair he most certainly *felt* at that moment in his life – a time of intense grief at that loss of his wife and uncertainty about the future of his son's life and his nation's stability. But his poem doesn't end there. His final, redeeming verse, proclaims, “then pealed the bells more loud and deep: God is not dead, nor doth he sleep! The wrong shall fail, the right prevail, with peace on earth, good will to men!”

I don't know how your families observe these days of preparation. At my house, we've been busy with decorating, and baking, and such. On Friday night, we hosted our first “Christmas party” of the season – for a group of students in the society of news designers for which my wife serves as an advisor. That's life in a college town, where by the time Christmas actually arrives on the calendar, all of the community celebrations will have already occurred.

And while that may not be your reality, my guess is that your decorations are either up or *going* up, and those “feel good” movies are either already playing on your televisions, or they will be in the not too distant future.

Holiday movies are a genre all to themselves. They almost all have the same theme, played out with different characters, in different time and circumstances. The theme is that despite whatever human realities stand in the way, faith, and hope, and love, and *peace*, finally win the day – that cynicism, doubt, or obstacles of any other sort – are no match for the *reality* of God’s intended purpose.

Psychologists tell us that many people struggle with the holiday seasons – where they see people “making merry” when their personal worlds are in turmoil or shambles. But to various extents, that is true of *all* of our lives. And in that awareness is found true “Christmas peace” – not peace, as Jesus said in John’s Gospel, that “the world gives.” But a better peace. A *greater* peace. *Christ’s* peace. The peace that means all creatures – lion and lamb, child and serpent, Jew and Gentile – in the final analysis, are creations of the One, True God of the universe, whose *divisions* are temporary and passing, and to whom ultimate peace and unity are promised when all is said and done.

As we make our way to Bethlehem in this Advent journey, may we be strengthened and comforted by the prophetic message of God’s peace. May we *celebrate* that peace where we find it in this world, and may we be motivated by its vision as we follow our calling to be our Lord’s servants and ambassadors to a divided nation and world..

To God be the glory.