

Christmas In the Trenches

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Christmas time is sometimes called the “season of peace.” But what happens when these familiar holidays come around, as they do this year, while the nations of the world are at war with each other? How are we to think about the message of peace when our news media are awash in blood night after night?

What I want to do this morning is try to contextualize and unpack three favorite pieces of Christmas lore to see whether these deliver a clue to how we can find peace in our souls when it seems that everything valuable in the world is being blown up.

Is peace really the central message of Christmas? Those who think so might say the central message of Jesus’ teachings is in the Sermon on the Mount where he told his disciples never to return evil for evil, but if an enemy slaps you on the cheek, turn the other cheek. In the Christmas story, this message is found in the gospel of Luke, in the words the shepherds heard the angels sing, repeated on millions of Christmas Cards this time of year: “Peace on earth, Goodwill to men.”

Now, it should be said here that Jesus does not always show us a peaceful side. In the Gospel of Matthew, (10:34-36) he says “Do not think that I am come to bring peace to the earth: I came not to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.” He also said in the gospel of Luke (12:49): “I came to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were already kindled.” These hostile words are deeply disturbing to those of us who want to think of Jesus as the prince of peace.

Certainly in the time of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the great Boston Unitarian poet of the mid-nineteenth century, Jesus was thought to be a bringer of peace, and that is why he made those words the

centerpiece of his great Christmas poem, so ably read just now by Michael, but the poem deals with the flat out contradiction between the message of peace and the horrible inhumanity of the Civil War which was then raging. At the outset of that war, Longfellow lost his wife, not to the war but to a domestic fire: her dress caught on fire in their home, and though Henry tried to put out the flames with his own body, it was too late and she died of the burns, leaving Henry to raise their six children by himself. Later in the war, Henry's oldest son Charley ran away to join the Union Army, and was wounded in battle. Henry travelled to Washington to bring him back to Cambridge and tended his son's wounds. It was out of this anguish that he wrote the great poem "Christmas Bells."

The poem starts with the peal of church bells, which would have been a common way to celebrate Christmas in Longfellow's day. That ringing echoed in some sense the chorus of the angels to the shepherds on that Gaililean hillside described in Luke's telling of the Christmas story: peace on earth goodwill to men.

This chorus of the bells echoing the angel voices is why Longfellow's poem was almost instantly taken up as a Christmas carol. But in the poem are two stanzas where are usually left out of the carol version, for in them the chorus of bells is answered by a chorus of cannons:

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound
The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

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!

Longfellow in that stanza is pointing out that the cannon fire does not just explode on the battlefield, but in the households north and south which are the homes of the injured. His "hearth-stones of a continent" adroitly weaves together the public and the private. The war had reached into his own household in Cambridge, hundreds of miles from the nearest fighting.

It is almost as if he is quoting those hostile predictions of Jesus that he will set brother against brother.

Let me pause here to zero in on that central phrase of the angelic concert “peace on earth, good-will to men.” I have had that etched on my consciousness since I was a child, it is almost the grandest thing about Christmas. Imagine my surprise when, later in life, I found that those particular words were based on a mistranslation. You will notice that the version in the UU gray Hymnal “Singing the Living Tradition,” has each stanza close with the line “peace on earth, to all good will.” The change from “men” to “all” is a familiar one, the hymnbook editors are trying to make the blessing more inclusive so that everybody understands it as including female as well as male.

But the shift from “men” to “all” is not the mistranslation I mean. It turns out that the most reliable Greek texts of the Gospel of Luke use the words Anthro^{po}is Eudokias. Anthro^{po}s means “man” in the inclusive or exclusive sense, and eudokias comes from roots (eu) meaning well and (dokia) meaning praise or favor. For many years, translators used a basic text which did not have the last letter clearly. But great things from little seeds grow; a more reliable text of the passage had that last little s, sigma, on the end of the phrase, and that indicated that the word en anthro^{po}is eudokias are in the genitive case which means that the author intended it to be some sort of possessive. Remember that the word in one context can mean good will but in another can mean favor. So the New Revised Standard version has the translation “Glory to God in the highest heavens and on earth peace among those whom he favors.”

Peace among those whom he favors? This is extremely disturbing to our universalist side. We would much rather God’s good will extend to every human being, rather than just those whom God favors. We are interested in the pealing of the bells drowning out the roar of the cannon.

Now Longfellow would not have known any of this linguistic parsing. What he knew and well expressed was the mid-nineteenth century Unitarian view of Christmas. It was not about the coming of the messiah who would free the Jews from the yoke of Roman oppression, nor about the victory of salvation over sin nor about victory over the devil. It was a more human feeling expressed in church bells and the hearth. The idea was

captured well by Charles Dickens in “A Christmas Carol” in a speech given by Fred, Scrooge’s nephew, to Scrooge:

"I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round -- apart from the veneration due to its sacred name and origin, if anything belonging to it can be apart from that -- as a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. And therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it has done me good, and will do me good; and I say, God bless it!"

The story and its characters—Ebenezer Scrooge, Bob Cratchit and Tiny Tim—defined the holiday’s meaning for the English-speaking world as the regenerative spirit of generosity, or what Dickens called his ‘Carol philosophy.’”

It isn’t that Jesus is a magician going around with a wand and waving it over all disputes between humans, changing them instantly into idyllic bliss. It is that the generous spirit of the nativity can lead people to look differently on their relations with their fellow humans. Indeed, this is the story of “A Christmas Carol.”

In his great poem ‘Christmas Bells’ Longfellow does not resolve for us the contradictions between the hellish speech of the cannons and the melodious pealing of the bells. Both are present, not only on the battlefields but in every heart in every American home.

This contradiction between heaven and havoc has deep roots in the scripture we read every year. In the prestory of Jesus’s birth as told in the Gospel of Luke, Mary had been visited by the Angel Gabriel and told that she is to bear the Messiah. She goes to a woman named Elizabeth, and when Elizabeth greets Mary, the child in Mary;s womb hears Elizabeth and jumps for joy. Elizabeth pronounces a blessing on Mary for bearing this hly child, and Mary then delivers a song which we call the Magnificat because it beging with the first line “My soul magnifies the Lord.” Among other things for which Mary praises the Lord is that He has looked with favor on the lowliness of his subjects; his mercy is for them that fear him; he has

shown strength with his arm and has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts; he has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent empty away.”

What I want us to notice here is that this is not a view of a passive God, this is a view of a God of justice, a God who will right the wrongs which cause so much suffering among the common people.

What strikes me about this song of Mary’s is that it is full of social inversion. What is social inversion? Masters have to obey their slaves, servants take charge of the household, It is reversing the roles of people in society. It often is a feature of the year-end celebrations of the ancient pagan world such as Saturnalia. Here in this paradigmatically Christian story, the storyteller borrows a theme from the pagan world all around him.

What does this tell us about Christmas? Maybe that the regular pecking order, the way things are, must be turned upside down from time to time.

Now I want to move forward to another wartime, perhaps the most senseless war in which America was ever involved, the so-called War to End Wars which decimated the manhood of so many European countries, World War I. Here the so-called Christmas Truce of 1914 actually stopped the fighting along a broad swath of the Western Front for two days. It is well described in this song written by folk singer John McCutcheon in the 1980s titled “Christmas in the Trenches.” This song has a made-up narrator and some made up details, but in its basic line it is true, it actually happened.

John McCutcheon "Christmas in the trenches

My name is Francis Tolliver. I come from Liverpool

Two years ago the war was waiting for me after school

To Belgium and to Flanders, to Germany to here

I fought for King and country I love dear

It was Christmas in the trenches where the frost so bitter hung

The frozen fields of France were still, no Christmas song was sung
Our families back in England were toasting us that day
Their brave and glorious lads so far away

I was lyin' with my mess-mates on the cold and rocky ground
When across the lines of battle came a most peculiar sound
Says I "Now listen up me boys", each soldier strained to hear
As one young German voice sang out so clear
"He's singin' bloody well you know", my partner says to me
Soon one by one each German voice joined in in harmony
The cannons rested silent. The gas clouds rolled no more
As Christmas brought us respite from the war

As soon as they were finished a reverent pause was spent
'God rest ye merry, gentlemen' struck up some lads from Kent
The next they sang was 'Stille Nacht'. "Tis 'Silent Night'" says I
And in two tongues one song filled up that sky
"There's someone commin' towards us" the front-line sentry cried
All sights were fixed on one lone figure trudging from their side
His truce flag, like a Christmas star, shone on that plain so bright
As he bravely strode, unarmed, into the night

Then one by one on either side walked into no-mans-land
With neither gun nor bayonet we met there hand to hand
We shared some secret brandy and wished each other well

And in a flare-lit soccer game we gave 'em hell
We traded chocolates, cigarettes and photographs from home
These sons and fathers far away from families of their own
Young Sanders played his squeeze box and they had a violin
This curious and unlikely band of men

Soon daylight stole upon us and France was France once more
With sad farewells we each began to settle back to war
But the question haunted every heart that lived that wonderous night
"whose family have I fixed within my sights?"
It was Christmas in the trenches where the frost so bitter hung
The frozen fields of France were warmed as songs of peace were
sung
For the walls they'd kept between us to exact the work of war
Had been crumbled and were gone for ever more

My name is Francis Tolliver. In Liverpool I dwell
Each Christmas come since World War One I've learned its lessons
well
That the ones who call the shots won't be among the dead and lame
And on each end of the rifle we're the same.

"On each end of the rifle we're the same." Where in Longfellow's poem, and Dicken's story Christmas stood for a softening of the spirit, here the effect of the Christmas truce was to recognize the common humanity of ally and enemy. That is pure Universalism. And it is thrilling.

But it is also against the disciplinary codes for the armies of the world. The problem is that it is hard to run a war if everyone is questioning “whose family have I fixed within my sights?” The high command on both sides of World War I saw to it that there were no repeats of the Christmas Truce of 1914 in the years that followed. I read somewhere that one of the people most critical of the troops that engaged in the Christmas Truce was a young German corporal named Adolph Hitler.

Peace on Earth. Is there a way we can strengthen the pacifist appeal of Christmas so that all warring parties would have to take a truce because there would be no one to fight? That is a dream promulgated in many songs, but it rarely works out on the ground. The problem with that idea is that wars are a contest and if one side suddenly lays down its weapons, the normal result is that the other side wins. The Confederate States in the Civil War did not compromise with the Union, they surrendered to them.

Maybe you are not caught on the horns of this dilemma, but I sure am. I was opposed to the Vietnam War because I considered the American side of it unjust, but I would have willingly fought and died for the Allies in World War II. My father did fight for them, and I am fortunate that he came home afterwards, else I would not be here this morning talking to you. At any rate, I could not be a conscientious objector in my youth. I was a pacifist but only for those wars I opposed.

Today the Christmas season finds us among two major wars. Yes, they are overseas, but we are being affected by them. Like the American Civil War in Longfellow’s day or the First World War in the 19-teens, they have a way of reaching into the heart of family life even when the military action is far away. I am in favor of continuing to support Ukraine in its attempt to repel Russian aggression, and was sickened by the assault of Hamas in Israel on October 7. But I find it hard to support the level of damage that Israel has visited upon the Palestinians in retribution.

And yet these are not even the only major wars going, just the ones to which we pay attention. According to Wikipedia, there are seven major armed conflicts in the world today. The article defines a major armed conflict as one in which more than 10,000 deaths have been reported in 2023 or 2022. In addition to the Russia-Ukraine and the Israel -- Hamas

wars, these include conflicts in Myanmar, the Mahgreb, the Mexican Drug war, the Ethiopian Civil Conflict, and the War in Sudan.

What do we do about such loss of life? Many of us who feel that Israel over-reacted to Hamas' attack of October 7 have tried with some success to get the Biden administration more solidly behind a permanent truce. When there was a short truce to exchange hostages and prisoners, this gave rise to hope that the truce might be prolonged. But the military commentators were strongly behind the position that Israel needed to get back to war so that the momentum would not be lost.

I would give that position more credence if I knew what the momentum for further fighting were for, other than increasing the body count. In particular, I don't see how the stated war aims of removing Hamas from power are going to be accomplished by force of military arms. And not only does the death toll continue to mount, the infrastructure of Gaza is continuing to deteriorate which will cast a strong shadow over the future for Gazans.

In the end of John McCutcheon's song, the narrator sums up the lessons learned in the Truce of 1914: "that the ones who call the shots won't be among the dead and lame, and on each end of the rifle, we're the same."

In ending, I can only put the question, not answer it: what can we do to bring about peace on earth? I don't have an answer, but I think I have a path to an answer. That path is through open and honest discussion. This needs to happen in our newspapers, in our churches, on our college campuses. But there has been a movement to quell open and honest discussion, particularly as it concerns criticism of Israel. The movement has already claimed one college president and has tried to claim another.

So let me leave you with the question: what can we do to encourage all the fighting parties in the world to beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks? Amen