

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

Christmas Eve
Luke 2:1-20

Something REMARKABLE happened, one hundred and ten years ago, on THIS NIGHT. By December of 1914, World War I (the great war, they called it), had raged for almost 5 months, and had already claimed nearly one million lives. But letters and diaries from the Western Front describe how the guns fell SILENT THAT Christmas Eve.

(Watch the Christmas Ad video)

I know, it's a commercial, but these days there's a lot of good stuff in commercials. It's a true story. The ad was made to be historically accurate, on the anniversary of the date, right down to the depth of the trenches. The event is called The Christmas Truce, and it's never happened again. Something truly REMARKABLE happened that day.

The ad ends with the words, "Christmas is for sharing," and the letters and diaries show that the soldiers DID INDEED exchange gifts, but is that ALL that was going on there?

What makes a person, holed up in a trench for weeks on end, FREEZING to death, begin to sing "Silent Night"? What makes a person take the risk of climbing OUT of that trench on Christmas Day?

It was a risk. Nothing had been agreed upon. And it was only on a small part of the front that it happened. In OTHER places, some soldiers DIED on Christmas day, trying to do that VERY SAME THING, and they were KILLED by soldiers who didn't WANT a truce. It was a very COURAGEOUS thing for them to do.

So why risk your LIFE, just to go shake the hand of your ENEMY? What is it about Christmas that inspires people to such courage, and humanity?

Another war raged in 1863, the American Civil War. It was a long cold winter, and the war between the states raged mercilessly. Antietam. Vicksburg. Gettysburg. Sons, fathers, and brothers from Mississippi to Maine had NOT come HOME for Christmas, and many would NEVER return.

Poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow sat in Cambridge Massachusetts pondering the state of the world around him. Longfellow had been widowed for two years, since his wife had tragically died in a fire, and his son, Charles, was now seriously wounded, having been injured by a Confederate bullet at the battle of New Hope Church.

As he sat nursing his son on the long road to recovery, he heard the Christmas BELLS, and the message of the angels proclaiming, "Peace on earth, goodwill towards men," but observed that the world of injustice and VIOLENCE seemed to MOCK the song.

And he took up his pen and wrote this poem:

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!

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!

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!"

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."

Listen to that last stanza again:

"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men."

Having endured the pain that Longfellow had experienced, and seen the things he had seen, WHAT brought him to the point that he could express such HOPE? What is it about CHRISTMAS that INSPIRES people to HOPE?

It's not just the sentiment of the season. It's not the bows and ribbons, the presents and decorations. There's something deeper and stronger.

People have found hope and courage on this night, because of what happened that FIRST night, the FIRST Christmas. Jesus was born, NOT in a PERFECT world, but FOR a HURTING world. He was born for REAL people, like you and me, people who live in the REAL WORLD.

He wasn't born in a warm palace surrounded by attendants; he was born in a barn, surrounded by animals and shepherds, in some backwater town. He wasn't born to an established couple and a respectable family; he was born to an unwed mother and an adoptive father. He wasn't born to the rich and powerful; he was born to peasants.

God CHOSE this. God CHOSE for his son to be born this way, to TELL us something. Jesus was born for YOU, with all your struggles and faults; YOU with your COMPLICATED life and difficult challenges; YOU will all your PAIN and sorrow. Jesus was born for YOU. He was born for REAL people, in the REAL world.

And when those Christmas angels ANNOUNCED his birth singing, "Peace on earth, good will to all," it meant that the world would CHANGE, MUST change, HAD CHANGED.

No more would war and injustice prevail; no more would pain and despair RULE this world. Jesus was born to bring LIGHT INTO our darkness, to show us the WAY of peace and hope, and

open our hearts to a NEW way of seeing the world. That sees people not as strangers and enemies, but as brothers and sisters. That sees God walking WITH us in the MIDST of our struggles and pain and loss. That sees God breaking INTO our world, and into our LIVES.

Tonight brings us hope and courage, because TONIGHT we HEAR the song of Christmas. We hear the Christmas angels SINGING, "I bring you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day a Savior...Glory to God in the highest. Peace on earth, good will to all." Amen.