

A CHRISTMAS PEACE

Rev. Dennis Kelly

At long last, we come to this evening, this moment, when family and friends gather together to celebrate Christmas. For four weeks we have prepared with the lighting of the Advent candles. For weeks of preparation have all come down to this night when we tell the story of God's gift to us. A child is born in a manger in Bethlehem to Mary and Joseph. His name is Jesus. He came to bring hope to those in the midst of despair, peace to those in the midst of broken relationships, joy in the midst of burdensome lives, and love in the midst of a world filled with indifference.

One of my favorite Christmas stories is one that I have seen and heard in a variety of ways. It was the inspirations for a movie released in 1992 called *A Midnight Clear* and starring Ethan Hawke. The story takes place on Christmas Eve in 1913, the first year of World War I. There was a break in the fighting between the British and the Germans on the Western Front, allowing each side time to think of what family and friends might be doing back home.

One young soldier said, "My parents are just finishing a toast to my health." Another said, "I can almost hear the church bells. My whole family will soon be walking out the door to hear the concert of the boys' choir at the cathedral."

The men sat silent for several minutes before a thin soldier looked up with tears in his eyes. "This is eerie," he stammered, "but I can almost hear the choir singing." "So can I," shouted another. "I think there is music coming from the other side."

The men scrambled to the edge of the trench and leaned out to listen. What they heard was a few German voices singing one of Martin Luther's Christmas songs: "From heav'n above to earth I come, to bear good news to everyone. Glad tidings of great joy I bring to all the world; and gladly sing."

When the hymn was finished, the English soldiers sat frozen in silence. Then one of them began to sing the chorus of "God rest ye merry gentlemen." By the time he finished the entire regiment had joined him in singing.

Once again there was a moment of silence until a German tenor began to sing "Stille Nacht" (Silent Night). This time the song was sung in two languages, a chorus of nearly a hundred voices echoing back and forth between the trenches, "Silent night, holy night! All is calm, all is bright..."

Soon after the British soldiers noticed a single German soldier walking towards them waving a white cloth in one hand and holding several bars of chocolate in the other. Slowly, men from both sides eased out into the neutral zone and began to greet one another. Each soldier shared what he had with the others: candy, cigarettes and even a bit of Christmas brandy. The soldiers even showed the

treasured pictures they carried of loved ones.

No one knows whose idea it was to start the soccer match, but with the help of flares the field was lit and the British and German soldiers played until they and the lights were exhausted. Then, as quietly as they came together, the men returned to their own trenches.

On Christmas day, men from both sides again joined together, even visiting the other's trenches. The German soldiers organized another game of soccer, wishing to avenge the previous night's torch-lit loss.

A few days later the cannons once again boomed across "no man's land" and the whine of rifles was again heard in the trenches. For some, however, it was never the same. The enemy was no longer faceless. Now he was an acquaintance with whom they shared a candy bar or a game of soccer. When the men looked down the barrels of their guns at the opposition they also saw the smiling faces of those whose pictures were shared on a silent, holy night when the birth of the Christ child drew hostile forces together as brothers and, for a few moments, gave weary soldiers a taste of peace and good will.

Like those soldiers long ago we gather together this Christmas Eve to briefly interrupt the routines of our lives and to celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace. No matter what storms are raging in our lives, no matter what internal or external battles we may be facing, this is a night in which we can let Hope and Peace and Joy and Love into our lives.

So many of our Christmas hymns and carols speak of the peace that arises out of restored relationships. In the song *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear* we sing with the angels "Peace on the earth, good will to all, from Heavens all gracious King." In *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* we hear the words "Peace on earth, ad mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled". And in *Silent Night* we sing "Sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace."

In our reading from Isaiah, we heard this beautiful vision of hope, peace, joy and love:

*For a child has been born for us, A son given to us;
Authority rests upon his shoulders,
And he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of peace.*

We must confess, however, that we live in a world in which peace is often illusive. Peace is only a dream in Bethlehem, the birthplace of our Lord. We long for a lasting peace in the Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and other place where violence and conflict has become a common part of life.

But we do not have to travel to distant lands to discover that peace is illusive. For some of you this past year has not been a time of hope or joy or love. Some of you, have lost loved one during this past year. Some of you, or perhaps your loved ones, have suffered significant illnesses. Some may suffer from depression or addictions. Some are in the midst of marriages that are struggling. Some may be trying to figure out who they are or what path in life they should follow. Some of you may even have begun to question your faith, either in God or in the church.

If this hits home to any of you, then the vision of the prophet Isaiah is addressed to you: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined.” We are the people who live in darkness, yearning for the light. So it is to us that God has sent his son, Jesus, the Prince of Peace. We are assured that no matter how dark or hopeless our lives might seem, no matter how little peace or joy we may be experiencing right now, there is a message of hope.

John’s gospel tells that message come to us in “the Word which came into being to be the light of all people and a light that shines onto any and all darkness.” This Word, says John *“became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”*

The Christmas Gospel of Luke tells us that this word became flesh in a child born in a manger, in the city of Bethlehem, surrounded by Mary and Joseph. And when Word named Jesus comes into being, the Angels appear in the darkness of night and say: *Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.* And then they say, *“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among all whom he favors.”*

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, you are the ones to whom God sent his son Jesus. You are the ones to whom the angels sing “Do not be afraid.” The light of Christ is shining upon you, seeking to bring hope, peace, joy and love into your life and to drive away whatever it is that you experience as darkness.

We may not change what is going on out there. But in this place, on this holy night, we are creating a sacred space where we can call a truce on the battles of our lives and stop to listen to and to experience the Christmas story. May this be for you a night of hope, peace, joy and love. Amen.

*Note: The story told above is adapted from a 2002 article by Jim Wallis in Sojourners Magazine titled **Christmas in the Trenches**. Wallis’ article is a reflection on a book published that year titled **Silent Night** by Stanley Weintraub. Its setting is during WWI. Other versions, including the movie place the setting in WWII.*