

Christmas Day, 2010
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard Oregon
The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector

Christmas is a season of poetry, sometimes sung and sometimes not. One of my favorite carols is based on a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. It was written in December, 1864, and reflects Longfellow's despair brought about by the death of his wife and the wounding of his son and the nation in the terrible war, as well as the dawning of hope as the war approached its end. A few years later an unknown author turned the poem into a Christmas carol by rearranging the stanzas and eliminating the direct references to the Civil War. We are not singing the carol, but I would like to read you the original poem called 'Christmas Bells'.

Christmas Bells by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

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, 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!

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!

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!"

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 chose that poem for today's celebration, because it seems to me to express the heart of this season of celebration. Much of the religious observance at this darkening time of year is about reminding ourselves that the evil or the trivial of current day-to-day reality is not the last word, is not the most truly real. Advent,

Christmas, and Epiphany all center around stories, stories treasured for centuries or even millennia to tell us fundamental truths about being human in this world. Our stories live in our minds to lead us toward what can be best in ourselves.

The story of Christmas is the story of God loving people in the midst of their foibles and even their evil, loving them sufficiently to come among them and live as one of them. The baby at the center is a baby with all of the joy and the potential of new life brought with every baby, but is also Immanuel, God-with-us, God himself taking on human life, to make it possible for the rest of us to live as we were truly meant to, in the fullness of our own potential, in full communion with the divine. It is a story of love and hope, in the midst of reality, the reality of poverty and rejection in a stable, and the real threat from the murderous King Herod.

Sometimes we focus on the crass and hypocritical around us and are led to cynicism, to give up on the possibility of real love or hope in our world. But Christmas reminds us that more is possible, that real human beings following the calling of the divine are able to do great things, are capable of extraordinary love and self-forgetfulness. Christmas tells us that God is with us in this, that we are not alone unless we chose to be and even then, God will pursue us into our own human, mortal condition.

It is our traditions, our faith in human possibility in a context far greater than any individual human, which enables us to live our lives for others, to commit ourselves to causes that far outstrip our own narrow self-interest.

A life lived only for oneself is a life lived in invincible poverty. A life lived for others, for the world, for the image of God in the world, for the peace of the world, for the joy and healing of the world, is rich indeed.

Telling ourselves these stories, whether gathered around a bonfire in a winter forest, or gathered in a great Cathedral, or gathered with our own families at home, telling ourselves and one another these stories nourishes hope in our hearts and gives us the strength to live by them.

It is often easiest to be cynical, to discard the ancient stories and their call to a life of love and dedication. It is easiest to accept the call of the world to self-seeking and self-protection, to concentration on meeting our own immediate needs while disregarding those of others. But, however easy this may be, it is fundamentally unsatisfying. Our hearts shrivel like Scrooge's as we pull into ourselves and distance ourselves from the suffering or concerns of others.

Like the bells which Longfellow heard, which played the tunes of carols, each containing a story of love and hope, a call to identify with God's call for peace among all people, our stories remind us of the need around us and hope for the future.

In the poem, we hear Longfellow first rejoice, then slide into despair brought by the real world of war around him, and finally be strengthened by the continued voice of the bells, the continued call to faith and hope even in the midst of war. Our stories strengthen us, even as they give us joy.

In the midst of the busy-ness and chaos of our lives, we can remind ourselves and one another of the stories that lie at the heart of the celebrations we are trying to create. And we can be the ones who ring the bells, who bring the peace into the midst of chaos.

All of the stories and the celebrations built around them speak to us of giving, of caring for others, of making peace, not just wishing for it. For many of us, holiday traditions include not only the direct worship of our beautiful church services, but also occasions of service to others, whether by helping our Good Neighbor Center families or by taking part in any of the many feasts and give-aways for the poor and hungry among us. Remembering those in need is how we reflect the infinite graciousness of God Incarnate into the world around us.

It is easy to allow ourselves to be swept away by the tornado which calls itself the 'Holiday Season', but if we center ourselves in prayer and wrap ourselves in the expectant contemplation of our sacred stories, we will be able to be calm in the midst of the madness, and bring with us moments of joy, wherever we find ourselves.

Many of us have pain or anxiety in our lives that calls us away from the hope and joy of the season of celebration, which indeed call the notion of celebrating into question. But Longfellow's bells rang in the midst of the war and reminded him that the joy was greater than the grief, that peace is greater than war. He was reminded and reminds us, that we can focus our minds and hearts with stories of courage and compassion, can ourselves be the bringers of joy and hope.

There are many Christmas stories that have grown up out of the original story of the birth of Christ, stories of exceptional devotion, compassion and hope. At this season of celebration, we bring out these stories from our own treasure houses. We all know some. Let us share them with one another. Each of these stories is like another bell, pealing out its message of joy to enliven the hearts of all. This year I pray that each of you may hear the bells ringing for you and may help others to hear them as well. Amen.