

Peace on Earth
Luke 2:8-16
December 24, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

Christmas Eve is here, Alleluia! The Christ-child is just about to be born, and our hearts are filled with joy. The ornaments are on the tree. We have Christmas dinner to look forward to. The world seems to be touched with a crystalline joy, if only for a few days.

This is not our first trip around the block, however. We know that soon, the ornaments will be packed away. The snow will look less like Christmas and more like slush. And our world will seem ordinary again, because we live in an in-between time. Christ was born 2,000 years ago, but God's kingdom has not yet been fulfilled. The angels are ready to proclaim "Peace on earth" again tonight, but lions do not yet lie down with lambs.

The hymn we sang earlier, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day," was written by the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. I want to tell you the story behind this hymn, because it is a perfect illustration of this "already, but not yet" time we live in. This story begins in great sadness but ends in the triumph of peace and joy.

Longfellow and his family lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He and his wife Fannie had five children: Charles, Ernest, Alice, Edith, and Allegra. In the summer of 1861, just a few months after the terrible violence of the Civil War began, Longfellow's wife Fannie died in a tragic accident. She was trimming her daughter Edith's hair and decided to preserve a lock of it in sealing wax. So, she began melting a bar of wax with a candle. A few drops of the hot wax fell unnoticed on her dress and smoldered there until the dress caught fire.

In her attempt to protect her children from the flames, she ran away from them and into Henry's study, in the next room, where he frantically tried to smother the fire by throwing his arms around her – severely burning himself. Fannie Longfellow was critically burned and died the next morning. Longfellow himself was so ill from his burns that he was not able even to attend her funeral.

He sank into a deep despair that lasted for years, and Christmases were especially dark for him. The first Christmas after Fannie's death, Longfellow wrote in his journal, "How inexpressibly sad are all holidays." On the anniversary of her death, he wrote, "I can make no record of these days. Better leave them wrapped in silence. Perhaps someday God will give me peace." His journal entry for Christmas 1862, a year and a half after Fannie's death, reads "'A merry Christmas' say the children, but that is no more for me."

Then, in 1863, Longfellow received word that his oldest son Charles, a lieutenant in the Army of the Potomac, had been severely wounded. Longfellow was unable to make any journal entry at all for Christmas that year.

But finally, and inexplicably, on Christmas Day of 1864, with his son still terribly disabled and the war raging on around him, Longfellow wrote the poem, "Christmas Bells," which later became our hymn.

When we sang the first two verses earlier, you may have thought this was a simple, joyful carol about the angels' song on that first Christmas night, but when you hear all the verses, and when you know the story of Longfellow's deep sadness and disillusionment with life, you recognize something else: This song is not a simple, joyful carol but a searing conversation between human despair and Christian hope.

Longfellow wrote:

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.

I 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 Longfellow acknowledged his own heart's need:

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."

...And then, from some graceful gift of God, Longfellow finds the faith to respond to his own despair with these resounding verses:

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:

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!

This is precisely the point of Christ's coming, this conversation between the roiling, aching human heart and the very heart of God. Throughout the Old Testament we hear this same deep sadness, this longing for God's peace that seems never to be at hand.

The human heart sighs, "O Lord, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me!" and the heart of God responds, "I am coming to you."

The human heart pleads, "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" And the heart of God whispers, "I am not dead; I do not sleep."

The human heart mourns, "I hear voices saying 'Peace, Peace,' but there is no peace." The heart of God replies, "My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you."

The human heart cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ... and the heart of God answers, "I am here."

I love Longfellow's great hymn. It is a perfect hymn for this day because it is so honest. It is no sugary sweet sentiment that seems stale by New Year's, but a ringing affirmation of God's peace, right in the face of the deepest pain. That is faith! Faith in God's ability to turn our deepest suffering into greatest joy. Faith in the peace that breaks into the world when God comes to us. Faith in the conversation itself, between our hearts and God.

May we all receive this same graceful gift of God that lifted Longfellow's soul from despair. Even now, may we find peace in our own spirits so that we, too, can proclaim God's intention for peace everywhere. And every week, with our worship and our fellowship and with the bell we ring, may we proclaim to all the world the good tidings of great joy:

God is not dead, nor doth he sleep;
Peace on earth, good will to men.

Amen