

A CHRISTMAS PEACE
Christmas Eve
December 24, 209

At long last, we come to this evening, this moment, when we gather together as family and friends to celebrate the birth of the Christ Child. Weeks of preparation have all come down to this night, when we tell the ancient story of God's gift to humankind. His name is Jesus, born in a manger in Bethlehem to Mary and Joseph. He brings hope in the midst of despair, peace in the midst of broken relationships, joy in the midst of burdensome lives, and love in the midst of a world filled with indifference. He is the light that comes to drive away the darkness of our lives.

I love telling Christmas stories. And one of my favorite is a story that is told in many forms. I first ran across this story in 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. It is supposed to be a true story that goes reads something like this.

On Christmas Eve in 1913, the first year of World War I, a strange quiet had settled on the western front. It was a welcome respite for a group of lonely English soldiers who had become all too familiar with the roar of the cannons and the whine of the rifles. As they reclined in their trenches each man began to speculate about the activities of loved ones 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."

All the men scrambled to the edge of the trench and cocked their ears. What they heard was a few sturdy German voices singing Martin Luther's Christmas song,

*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 a large man with a powerful voice broke into the chorus of "God rest ye merry gentlemen." Before he had sung three bars a dozen voices joined with him. By the time he finished the entire regiment was singing.

Once again there was an interlude 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....”

“Someone is approaching!” a sentry shouted, and attention was focused on a single German soldier who walked slowly, 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. In the next golden moments each soldier shared what he had with the others: candy, cigarettes and even a bit of Christmas brandy. The soldiers even showed the battered, but 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.

In a few days 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 who shared a candy bar or played soccer. When 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 peace. Here are some more familiar ones:

*It came upon a midnight clear that glorious song of old,
From angels bending near the earth, they touched their harps of gold.
Peace on the earth, good will to all, from heav’n’s all gracious king.”
The world in solemn stillness lay to hear the angels sing.*

*Hark! The herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn king;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.”
Joyful all you nations, rise; Join the triumph of the skies;
With angelic hosts proclaim, “Christ is born in Bethlehem!”
Hark the herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn king!”*

*Silent night, holy night! All is calm, all is bright.
Round yon virgin mother and child, holy infant so tender and mild,
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.*

*His authority shall grow continually,
And there will be endless peace
For the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
With justice and with righteousness
From this time onward and forever more.*

We must confess, however, that we live in a world in which peace is often illusive. Peace is only an echo in Bethlehem, the birthplace of our Lord. We long for a lasting peace in the Middle East, in Iraq, in Afghanistan and other places with a history of conflict and bloodshed.

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

There are any number of reasons why many who gather here tonight and other congregations just like this one, come with heavy hearts yearning for hope in the midst of despair, peace in the midst of broken relationships, joy in the midst of anxiety and burdens, and love in the midst of indifference.

If you are one of those people, 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. We are the people who yearn for the light. And so it is to us that God has sent his son, Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

Similarly, the opening verses of the Gospel of John tell us that:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was god. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. Who has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all peoples. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

These words assure us that no matter how dark our lives might seem, no matter how little peace we experience in our lives, there is something there that is more powerful than the darkness. There is the Word which came into being to be the light of all people a light that shines onto any and all darkness. This Word *“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 whom God favors. You are the ones to whom God sent his son. You are the ones to whom the angels say, “Do not be afraid, for to you is born a savior, who is the Lord. You are the recipient of the good news. On you the light of Christ is shining, 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.