

Calm and Bright - Sleep in Heavenly Peace - Isaiah 2:1-4, 9:2, 6-7

Norwalk Christian Church, December 2, 2018, Calm and Bright Series, Advent 1, Year A

It was Christmas Eve 1914, 5 months into World War 1. The frontlines of the British Army and the German Army were tucked away in opposing trenches. For the day, they had called a truce. It didn't seem right fighting on Christmas.

Quietly, in each trench, the soldiers observed their particular Christmas customs, best they could on a battlefield. And in the silence of that night, the British soldiers began to hear their enemies singing their favorite carol, "Silent Night," in German, its original language: *Stille Nacht! Heil'ge Nacht! Alles schläft; einsam wacht.*

Exactly 96 years from the day the song was originally performed, once again, those beloved words created a stillness. The British soldiers decided to join in, and started singing in English, *Silent night! Holy night! All is calm; all is bright.* And for a moment, opposing armies sang together in their own language.

Moved by this moment, one British soldier bravely stuck his head out of the trench. The Germans saw, but they didn't shoot. They could not shoot. Soon, another soldier did the same, and then another. One German joined in, popping up out of their trench. Then more. A British soldier climbed onto the battlefield and began walking towards the Germans. Others joined him, and the Germans emerged.

There, on the battlefield, still riddled with gun shots and blood, they met and shook hands. They shared names, John, Otto. They shared gifts--chocolate and cigarettes. They played soccer. They buried their dead.

On Christmas Day, 1914, right in the middle of World War 1...there was peace.

Some of the officers who were there wrote of this heavenly moment in letters back home. Hear their words, written almost 100 years ago:

Marti: "The Germans started singing and lighting candles about 7.30 on Christmas Eve, and one of them challenged anyone of us to go across for a bottle of wine. One of our fellows accepted the challenge and took a big cake to exchange."

Don: "We came from our mouseholes and saw the English advancing towards us and waving cigarette boxes, handkerchiefs and towels. They had not rifles with them and there we know it could only be a greeting and that it was alright."

Marti: "We had a church service and sang hymns, we met the Germans midway between the trenches and wished each other a 'Merry Christmas'. We exchanged buttons, badges, caps, etc, and we all sang songs."

Don: “They gave us cigars and cigarettes and toffee and they told us they didn’t want to fight, but had to. Some could speak English as well as we could and some had worked in Manchester. The Germans seem very nice chaps who were awfully sick of the war.”

Marti: “We were able to move about the whole of Christmas Day with absolute freedom. It was a day of peace in war. It is only a pity that it was not a decisive peace.”

Don: “A German soldier said to me ‘today (Christmas Day) nice; tomorrow, shoot.’ As he left me he held out his hand, which I accepted, and said: ‘Farewell, comrade.’ With that we parted....”

I admit, until I read those words from actual letters written by those who were there, I thought this story was fictional--an apocryphal story that was good and maybe even true, just not fact.

But it did happen. For a moment, peace--heavenly peace.

And then, shoot. The war continued for almost four more years, finally ending exactly 100 years ago, November 11th, in the truce we mentioned on Veteran’s Day.

Every Advent, we feel tension. Tension between already, but not yet. Tension between *HAS* and *IS*. Is it: Christ *HAS* come, or is it Christ *IS* Coming?

Advent is a season of waiting, but also celebrating--we celebrate God coming into the world...yet here we are, singing, praying, lighting candles, waiting for God to come. Our songs are “Joy to the World, the Lord Is Come” and “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.”

We say peace has come into this world, yet here we are...waiting.

Yet, as we wait, look all around us. There *are* glimpses. Glimpses of peace. Rays of peace’s light peeking through the darkness--heavenly peace, shining in our world.

It shined in that Austrian church 200 years ago, when the church first sang the beloved hymn. It shined onto that battlefield 104 years ago. It shined in Bethlehem on that Holy Night. And still, if we look, we see it shine today.

When enemies come together--heavenly peace shines. When broken hearts are mended--heavenly peace shines. When people find new way after loss, grief, break-ups, and hard times--heavenly peace shines. When the church goes out into the world, and serves and fights for justice and loves others as God loves us all--heavenly peace shines.

In a thousand places in a thousand ways--right here, right now--heavenly peace is shining!

Thousands of years before Christ was born, the prophet Isaiah spoke of this heavenly peace. Though the prophet wouldn't have the language for or understanding of who Jesus would be and what that could mean for the world, the prophetic vision painted by the prophet has inspired Christians to see in these ancient words a picture of Christ's coming into our world.

Hear again the prophet's ancient vision of heavenly peace:

Marti: In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.

Don: Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord...that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths."

Marti: And "they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

Don: "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.

Marti: "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 shall be endless peace."

On the mountain of the Lord, peace will be established. The people of God will worship. And then, the prophet says, "All the nations of the world shall *stream* into it."

Stream--the Hebrew word translated *stream* can mean "flow like a river." But, it can also mean, "shine in joyful radiance."

I like that--Shine in joyful radiance.

As the nations stream closer to the mountain of God, closer to worship, closer to peace--they will begin to shine in joyful radiance. They closer they stream to God, the brighter their light streams into the world, as they become reflections of God's joyful radiance, streaming God's peace throughout the earth.

The light of peace streams, as they beating swords into plows, spears into shovels and rakes. As they grow gardens, not violence. As they study peace, not war.

From the mountain of God and from the people of God--the vision of heavenly peace catches on and streams throughout the world. And the people who have lived in darkness--we will see the great light.

And everytime a heart is mended, a grudge laid down; Every time a difference discussed at the table, and eyes are opened, and lines are crossed; everytime a weapon is laid down, and a truce is called; everytime we hope again, believe again, stream again --the Prince of Peace comes again, the light shines brighter and brighter, the circle of peace grows wider and wider, until one day, from the mountain of God it will stream until it encircles the world

Until that day--each of us, in little ways and big, will light the candle of God's heavenly peace with our lives, until the whole world is filled with peace and light, and God makes the world so calm and bright.