

1 Christmas A December 29, 2019
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Christmas Bells
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

Renowned poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was no stranger to the rich complexity of the light and darkness of life. He experienced joy, he loved his wife and children, he believed in human rights and was a staunch abolitionist, and he suffered tragedy and loss. One the biggest losses in his life was that of his beloved wife, who died from severe burns after her dress caught on fire in a tragic accident. Henry felt a deep grief after her death, and since there was little in the way of care available for people like Henry whose grief wasn't unusual, at times he feared he would be committed to an asylum. Less than two years after his wife died, Henry's eldest son Charley secretly left home and enlisted in the 1st Massachusetts Artillery, believing deeply, against his father's wishes, to fight for his country in the Civil War. Yet, despite being opposed to the war, Henry gave permission for his son to enlist when he was eventually contacted by a commanding officer. Despite being his dream, military life was hard on Charley. Early on he became so ill Henry traveled to Washington to care for him. But the worst was on August 15, 1863 when Charley was shot and seriously wounded during battle. The doctors told Henry his son would require at least 6 months to recover and when he did there was a possibility he would be paralyzed.

Unless we have had the same experience, it is hard for any of us to imagine how all this tragedy effected Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. He was suffering the grief of loss of his beloved wife, he must have felt some disappointment and hurt when his son left home without telling him and did the very thing he did not want his son to do. He seemed to have accepted his son's decision, but it probably wasn't a joyful acceptance. We can only imagine what he felt when he received the news of his son's severe injury. That is a lot of tragedy, a lot of loss, a lot of sadness, of darkness for one person in a short period of time.

Yet we have some idea of how the great poet handled all this when on Christmas Day in 1863 he wrote the following words you may have heard before:

"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 all. And 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 all. 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 all. 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 all. 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 all. 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 all!' Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: 'God is not dead; nor doth God sleep! The wrong shall fail, the right prevail, with peace on earth, good-will to all.'"

156 years later, there is still a deep truth to this poem, the kind of truth that is at the heart and shines with the light of the season we continue to celebrate, the season of Christmas. The season of 12 days the church gives us to celebrate, contemplate, study, and participate in the Mystery of the Incarnation as the author of John's Gospel so beautifully wrote: "God became flesh and dwelt among us." Or, as our Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, the Rt. Rev. Michael Curry said, "God made the decision to show us what we mean to God."

Today's section of John's Gospel also reminds us that God did not become flesh and dwell among us because things were going really well here on earth, and God just wanted to join the party already in progress. God decided to show us what we mean to God because that is exactly what we needed because things weren't necessarily going all that well for all people. There was injustice, tragedy, suffering, all usually caused by humanity's hubris and arrogance, our lust for power, superiority and prestige; our tendency to choose hate, cruelty, anger, all the stuff of what the author of John's Gospel called "darkness".

Today's beautiful Gospel describes the what scholars call the "Christmas Event" as God who spoke light into being over chaos back in the beginning, once again spoke Light into being, only this Light is God's own self, God's only Son, who alone can show us what God's law didn't: who God is. And who God is, is love. And who God loves is all of God's creation, including people, even the people who choose the darkness of fear over the light and love of God in Jesus Christ.

According to John's Gospel, when God came to us in the Mystery of the Incarnation and dwelt with humanity, most of humanity rejected God's love, preferring the ways of fear and hate. Yet, the author of John's Gospel also states for those who received God's love, a new grace is also received. This poetic description is very much what the words of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem called *Christmas Bells* describes: the darkness of human tragedy as painful as it was for him was not enough to block out the sound of hope and peace of the bells at Christmas. Perhaps that is why this poem was put to a tune several years later and remains a beloved Christmas song to this day.

Jesus birth, death, and resurrection began the work of redemption in the world, but it did not happen in one fell swoop, for people still have the gift of free will, and are free to choose the comfort of darkness over the brightness of the light that could

expose the hurts we tend to hide instead of heal, or the parts of life or ourselves we choose to ignore instead of face and do the difficult work to change out of fear of what we might lose instead of in hope of what everyone might gain. The good news is the darkness is not all there is, and there are those who are willing to let their wills be God's will, and look into and live into the light and the beautiful hope they see there, and encourage all of us to follow them into the light.

I saw an example of this only a few days ago on social media. It was a clip of Presiding Bishop Michael Curry's latest appearance on CBS This Morning, a morning television program. He was asked to speak about the true meaning of Christmas, but before we saw him or heard his name, the host of the television show stated a couple of statistics about the decline in church attendance and in Christianity. Then the host awkwardly shifted to introducing our Presiding Bishop by talking about his popularity after preaching at the Royal Wedding. Instead of asking Presiding Bishop Curry to further explain his description of Christmas as God's decision to show us what we mean to God, the hosts peppered him with statements about how it isn't easy to be nice to people who aren't receptive, and how divided our country is politically, how hard it is for many families to be together because of our politics, there was even a comment about how what Bishop Curry says is nice and all, but it isn't practical. Our Presiding Bishop never rose to the bait of getting into a fight. He patiently and repeatedly reminded his hosts that love isn't "sweet sentiment", love is a commitment and a decision, like God showed us in the Incarnation. He further went on to say because love is not sentimental or just being nice, honesty is essential to love, and it is okay to tell someone you disagree with them, and you can do so without demeaning the person's humanity. Because, he went on to say, we need each other, we are better when we are together, that community can be difficult, it can be frustrating, but when all is said and done, Jesus showed us God loves us and God wants us to love God back and to love our neighbors as ourselves. The brief exchange is a good example of the light of God's love shining in the darkness of hard-heartedness, and I encourage you to watch it for yourself because it shows there is no quick, easy solutions to the problems and sorrows of life, only living one choice at a time into the Love of God who is with us wherever we are.

The Mystery of the Incarnation is an invitation to live in the light of Christ, to let that light heal our wounds, help us face our fears, and love God with our whole heart, mind, soul, and strength and love our neighbor as ourselves, for the simple reason that God loves us and our neighbors, God loves the people we like and the ones we can't stand, the people we fear, the people we disagree with, even the ones who reject God. Our Presiding Bishop reminds us loving our neighbor doesn't have to look like forcing

or convincing them to think like we do, it means loving God first, and showing others what it is like to live in that love by what we say and what we do, because love is not a feeling; it is a decision, a choice, and a commitment, especially when things are hard. And like the words of the poem *Christmas Bells* tell us, this is how, even in the darkest moment, there can be glimpses of peace on earth and good-will to all.