

Carol of the Bells

Even in the best of years Christmas can be a hard holiday. The very season, itself, holds out a promise of happiness, which is really unattainable. The joys of Christmas seem to dangle just out of reach, to dwell just beyond the horizon. We all desire happiness. We all seek real connection and friendship. And so every year, we become the target audience for marketing schemes- we are shown over-exaggerated, commercialized images, which cause us to hope that just maybe this year will be different. And then reality hits; it hits some of us harder than others. Instead of the elusive happiness, many are greeted with loneliness, depression and general sadness. As I said, even in the best of years Christmas is a hard holiday, but we are not living in the best of years, are we? As 2020 comes to an end the phrase that comes to mind is “good riddance”. Most of us, if not all of us, are happy to see this dreadful year come to a close. We welcome its departure, we rejoice that it will soon be a part of history. We accept that with every give there is a take, but this year the taking has been disproportionate to the giving. We have given a lot only to have much taken from us. And here we are on Christmas Day defeated in many ways by the cruel twists and turns of fate. Our comfort has been disrupted, our family traditions disturbed, our sense of security displaced, our confidence in man-made solutions destroyed. How can Christmas really have any meaning in a time such as this?

Many years ago, there was a man who asked that very same question. “A merry Christmas, says the children, but that is no more for me” he recorded in his journal. He questioned not only Christmas, but the very goodness of God Himself. He had been brought to this low point of existence by a series of unfortunate events. In 1861, his wife had died tragically in a house fire. In an attempt to save her life, his face and arms had been severely burned. His burns were so bad, in fact, that he would live the rest of his life with a daily reminder of her death borne out by the scars covering his body. One great tragedy in life is enough, but another was added to him. In 1863, his son, Charley, would join the fight of the Civil War.

Despite his father's pleas and protests, he enlisted. Many Christmases would pass silent in his home: lost in depression, mourning the death of his wife, worrying about his son and his future. To the insult, which life had dealt him, came the news of injury. For you can't beat the odds forever and soon enough he got word that his son had been critically injured in battle. And so it was on Christmas Day, 1863, he found himself in a most pitiful state- dejected, downtrodden, depressed. In an effort to clear his troubled mind he decided to go for a walk. Can you picture him? Advanced in years, wearing a beard to cover the scars upon his face, consumed by a father's worry, wrestling with that age old question: where is God and does He care? As he walked along, he heard the local church bells. "Their old familiar carols play and wild and sweet the words repeat of peace on earth, good will to men!" But like the cold, he tried desperately to shake off the tenor of the message. After all, there is no place for such nostalgia when injustice and violence and suffering mock the very promise of peace so optimistically ringing out as truth. Can one really believe that such things are still believed by anyone? But the bells kept ringing in his ears, pestering him, nagging him, they would not let him forget God. Angered by the lunacy of peace and good will amidst so much war and bloodshed, he spouted his bitter bile: "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". "And in despair, he bowed his head...there is no peace on earth, for hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth good will to men". In that moment, he surrendered. It was Job-like in character and intensity. In his surrender, he met his Maker. At the end of his futile search, he discovered God had been searching for Him all along. God was with him in his darkest hour. For this is the way of God. He had forsaken God, but God had most certainly not forsaken him. And so this man recorded his encounter with God, and his words flow like poetry, they document his ascent from darkness to light. They chronicle his crisis of faith. For those bells were like the very stones Christ prophesied would cry out His name (Luke 19:40). They were instruments of salvation in the hands of the Divine: "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!”

His words are beautiful and timeless and we know them today as the popular song, “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day”. For his courage to share his deepest thoughts and for his foresight to record his great battle with God, we should all be grateful to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow for indeed his carol captures well the true meaning of Christmas. Christmas is not just meant for the best of years. In fact, it is best suited for the soils of turmoil. In darkness, in suffering, in times of anguish and uncertainty, this is when the message of Christ’s birth has real meaning. For as long as the world still entices us, the message of Christmas will be foolishness. But as soon as we discover the cold indifference of the world, the utter emptiness of its promises, the bankruptcy of its thoughts, the deficiency of its comforts, then Christ’s birth elevates us beyond ourselves. For Christ was born for times such as these; He came for the wayward soul, the lost, the forgotten, the poor, the needy to lead us all through this valley of the shadow of death into life everlasting. For Christ was born to us, for us, with us, and His message of hope is ours now and forever. It can never be taken away. It can never be silenced. It will echo through eternity, through every land, through every generation, through every tribe and nation: “A voice, a chime, a chant sublime of peace on earth, goodwill to men”. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Jeremy H. Mills

Merry Christmas!