

42-02-11-I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day

Advent, Christmas, suffering, grief, tragedy, war, peace

Luke 2:14

Advent is humanity's highest hope that Good will triumph in the end.

INTRODUCTION: (HOM.idea the theme of the carol (title).

–[Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote “*Christmas Bells*” during the Civil War, in which his oldest son was severely wounded. Two years earlier he lost his wife, whom he was still mourning 20 years later. The Scripture phrase referred to in the poem is the angelic announcement of the 1st Advent– **Luke 2:14 (NKJV)**, “*Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, good will toward men.*” Ten years before he died, his poem was set to the familiar tune we know today:

I heard the bells on Christmas Day	And with the sound \ The carols drowned
Their old, familiar carols play,	Of peace on earth, good-will to men! \
and wild and sweet \ The words repeat	It was as if an earthquake rent
Of peace on earth, good-will to men! \	The hearth-stones of a continent,
And thought how, as the day had come,	And made forlorn \ The households born
The bellfries of all Christendom	Of peace on earth, good-will to men! \
Had rolled along \ The unbroken song	And in despair I bowed my head;
Of peace on earth, good-will to men! \	"There is no peace on earth," I said;
Till ringing, singing on its way,	"For hate is strong, \ And mocks the song
The world revolved from night to day,	Of peace on earth, good-will to men!" \
A voice, a chime, \ A chant sublime	Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
Of peace on earth, good-will to men! \	"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
Then from each black, accursed mouth	The Wrong shall fail, \ The Right prevail,
The cannon thundered in the South,	With peace on earth, good-will to men."

–No poem is long remembered or often quoted unless it echoes some area of human emotion. This one resounds with two: despair and hope.

–[This sermon comes in the wake of the Connecticut massacre: 27 lives, mostly children, murdered by an autistic man who then killed himself. We focus on this tragic loss of life. It's so close to home. We feel pain for the grieving parents. But yesterday 41,000 children starved to death. Around the globe war is still devouring young lives in political struggles that combat alone will never resolve.] If this is all we look at, we'll see only despair, and we'll join Longfellow in the 6th line of his poem: 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!"

I. God Made Humans with a Heart that Can Hurt

A. *I don't even need to say that—we know it too well*. Our hearts get broken too many times in life, and often the scars hurt for years.

B. *But what's the alternative? No human heart?* [**The Tin Woodsman's complaint** in the Wizard of Oz: “As for you, my galvanized friend, you want a heart. You don't know how lucky you are not to have one. Hearts will never be practical until they can be made unbreakable.” “But I still want one.”]

C. Because we were made in God's image, we were given hearts that can be hurt because God has one. (BUT the 1st Advent reversed it: it gave God exactly the same human heart that we have.)

TRANS: In the “*Our Father...*” we pray God's “kingdom come,” that His “will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” God's answer was to send heaven to earth by His Son to becoming one of us. The earth is hurting! Earthly hearts are hurting! But God has joined us in the pain. Christ's birth brought the promise of “peace on earth, good-will to men!” **Advent established humanity's highest hope that Good will triumph in the end.**

II. God Allows the Hurting Heart to Question Him

A. God isn't angry if we question, doubt or even disagree with Him:

1. He listened patiently to the complaint of the prophet Habakkuk—Hab 1:2-3, O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. – **Hab 1:13**, You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?
2. He made sure the questions of the Psalmist became part of the Bible—Psa 10:1, Why, O LORD, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? – **Psa 44:23** Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever! – **Psa 88:14**, O LORD, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me?

B. The whole book of Job is about a hurting heart questioning God, but God's concern in the end was that Job kept communicating with Him (which Job's three friends who accused him did not). [**Charles Williams** (intro, Paul's “the pot” & “the potter”): “The Book of Job... has saved Christendom from being misled by Saint Paul's rash refusal to allow the thing formed to ask questions of him that formed it, the pot of the potter:... No pot—so far—has asked questions of the potter in a voice the potter can understand; when it does, it will be time enough to compare pots to men. The criticism is not aimed at Saint Paul who dropped the phrase in the midst of a great spiritual wrestle, not as a moral instruction. But it has been used too often by the pious to encourage them to say, in love or laziness, ‘our little minds were never meant....’ Fortunately there is the book of Job to make it clear that our little minds were meant. A great curiosity ought to exist concerning divine things....The Lord demands that his people shall demand an explanation from him. Whether they understand it or like it when they get it is another matter, but demand it they must and shall. Humility has never consisted in not asking

questions; it does not make men less themselves or less intelligent, but more intelligent and more themselves.”]

TRANS: In the midst of *tragedy, grief, suffering*, we ask “*Why, God? How could You let this happen to me, my loved ones, my nation, my world?*” In *despair, Longfellow’s poem* says: “*Why do heavenly bells ring out a promise of ‘peace on earth, goodwill toward men,’ when cannon blasts are drowning out the message?*” But the last stanza gives the answer: 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."

III. God Wants the Hurting Heart to Trust Him for the Outcome

- A. God will end all war, all hunger, all suffering, exactly at the best time possible– Rev 21:1, Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away... (God is in a cosmic balancing act that takes account of every person, all their actions [including prayers], and all results of every interaction of those actions, to make sure the best of all possible outcomes happens.)
- B. God will heal hurting hearts and eliminate their pain– Rev 21:4, He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. [Sadhu Sundar Singh, in a vision of the afterlife, saw a man who died as a child and grew up in heaven welcoming his aged mother who had just died: “*All around were matchless and exceedingly beautiful mountains, springs and landscapes, and in the gardens was abundance of all kinds of sweet fruits and beautiful flowers. Everything the heart could desire was there. Then he said to his mother, “In the World, which is the dim reflection of this real world, our dear ones are grieving over us, but, tell me, is this death, or the real life for which every heart yearns?” The mother said, “Son. this is the true life. If I had known in the world the whole truth about heaven, I would never have grieved over your death....”*]

CONCLUSION:

–Angels announced “*on earth peace, good will toward men*” at the 1st Advent, because Christ’s Incarnation brought the platform for that promise. At just the right time–the best time–God will say, “*Curtains!*” to this world’s history, and the 2nd Advent of Christ will fulfill that promise:

"The Wrong shall fail, \ The Right prevail, \ With peace on earth, good-will to men."

–[Gandhi said, “*A man with a grain of faith in God never loses hope, because he ever believes in the ultimate triumph of Truth.*”] **Advent brought the Savior Who will fulfill this universal hope for Good to triumph in the end!**