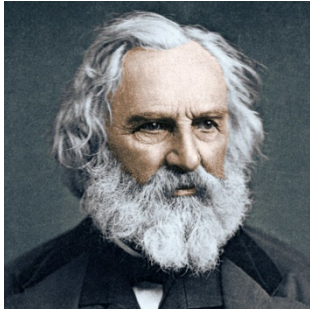


Lost Verses of Famous Carols
God is Not Dead Nor Doth He Sleep!
John 14: 27

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

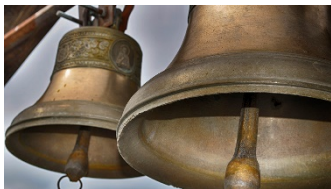
**December 27, AD 2020
Gerrit Scott Dawson**



“I Heard the Bells” was written on Christmas Day in 1864, during the Civil War, by famous writer Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The simple rhythm of the words sounds like bells ringing. As I read stanzas 1 and 3, note how Longfellow’s mood changes:

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words of peace on earth, good will to men.

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."



The beautiful bells of Christmas rang out from the churches across the town and countryside around Cambridge, Massachusetts. The bells tolled the angel words, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will toward men.” But when Longfellow thought of life and the world, he had a crisis of confidence. The bells seemed to be lying. “Hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth.” The nation had been at war for three horrible years. Where, indeed, was the peace of Christmas?

The song is even more poignant when you realize the personal story behind it. The state of the nation was one of sadness. The war had begun in April of 1861. But in July of 1861, tragedy struck at the heart of Longfellow’s personal life. He and his family were at home. His wife, Frances, was upstairs. She had just cut a lock of hair from her daughter, and wanted to seal it in an envelope so that one day the grown daughter could see the golden hair of her youth. But some of the hot wax from the seal had dripped on Frances’ dress. A wind blew through the

window and ignited the wax into flames. Longfellow heard the screams and ran upstairs. He threw a rug around his wife to douse the flames, but alas it was too small. She continued to burn. Not knowing what else to do, Longfellow rushed to his wife and embraced her with his own body. He smothered the flames with himself, severely burning his own face, arms and hands. Longfellow's trademark beard was a result of the fact that due to the scars of his burns, he could no longer shave. Sadly, his heroic sacrifice had been in vain. Too little too late. Frances died the next morning.

Emotionally, Longfellow never fully recovered from the loss. Christmas became a dark holiday to him. According to Tom Stewart's research, the first Christmas after Frances' death, Longfellow wrote in his diary, "How inexpressibly sad are all holidays." A year after the incident, he wrote, "I can make no record of these days. Better leave them wrapped in silence. Perhaps someday God will give me peace." Then, Longfellow's journal entry for December 25th 1862 reads: "'A merry Christmas' say the children, but that is no more for me."¹

Late in 1863, things got worse. Longfellow received news his oldest son Charles, a lieutenant in the Union Army, had been severely wounded. The bullet made him a cripple the rest of his life. Longfellow would make no entry at all in his journal that Christmas. It was not until the next Christmas that his pen was loosed and he wrote "I Heard the Bells." Is it any wonder that between the nation's war weary mood and Longfellow's personal anguish that he wrote, "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.'" If we are honest, we know this feeling, and we seem to know it all the more certainly at Christmas time. Yes, Mr. Longfellow, how inexpressibly sad are all holidays. Enough to make the courage of kings and priests fail. For it can seem that God has deceived us. He tells us to believe all is well, but the sword reaches our very life.

The last time I preached about this carol, we were walking through Bob and Susie Tucker's battle with her ovarian cancer. The week before the sermon, I spent an anxious day praying and waiting for news of Susie's diagnosis. I expected the best. She was so healthy. So full of life and faith. The Tucker's mean so much to our church. They're such good friends. So of course this all must be just a scare. We'll praise God as soon as we hear good news. But the news was not the best; it was the worst fears of cancer realized. There is a blue coffee mug that sits on my desk throughout the day. After I read Bob's text, I picked up that mug in my right hand. I had the wind up. I aimed for the far brick corner of my office. I was furious. I wanted to smash something. But I did not release. I put the mug

down. I let the anger return to anguish. I waited to recover my courage, then texted Bob back, “We pray now with broken hearts and defiant spirits.”

News from the world appalls and astounds us. 2020 has been a year like no other. Tensions run high. This virus business wears us out. Sometimes we feel like we have lost our courage to face another minute. We have no confidence to love, to try harder, to get on with it. Let alone energy to get jacked up for another year of pontificating, regulations, riots and distrust. Do you ever want to quit? I do. Hate is strong and mocks the song. There is no peace on earth. That can very well seem like the last word.

Let’s think carefully about this. We know the world is this way. It keeps on spinning. We are born, we live, we sweat, we toil, we grieve, we die. Generation upon generation. Nothing changes. We strut and fret our hour upon the stage and we are gone. There is no peace on earth, only striving that leads to dying. But the news at Christmas is that God has interrupted the futility of the world by coming to us. He comes to account for the suffering of the world by taking it on himself. We are not bound to this endlessly spinning earth. Heaven has come down. Heaven is opened up. God enters the scene and interrupts the flow. He takes our suffering as his own and bears it with us and for us. He takes our dying as his own and redeems it. Now all can come within his embrace. Glory to God. Peace on earth. Good will toward men.

What else could it have been but the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that caused the change in Longfellow’s poem. For our carol turns from despair to hope. Hear what he wrote next:

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.”

Somehow, Longfellow found his courage again. Amidst a backdrop of national agony and personal tragedy, when Christmas had brought nothing but despair, Longfellow recovered his faith. God is not dead, nor doth he sleep. We are not spinning around and around in endless futility. The Christmas news is that God has pierced the sin-dark shroud of night. The baby sleeping in the manger is the sure sign that God is not sleeping in regards to us. He has come down from heaven to do some work. “Glory to God and peace on earth” is news not just of the baby, but of the cross. The cross alone accounts for our suffering, for God has taken our

death as his own, our pain as his own, our sin as his own. And he has brought reconciliation and healing, and everlasting hope.

Well, I think Longfellow himself gives us a clue as to how the transformation occurred. He wrote, “Then pealed the bells more loud and deep.” The church, the people of Christ, proclaim his gospel, year after year, Christmas after Christmas. In the dark of the year, in the season of sadness, we nevertheless ring the bells. We proclaim the gospel in season and out, in good times and bad. News! News! God has come. God knows what our life is like from the inside out. He has taken all this on himself. The church does not lose her courage even in the darkest times. We continue to worship and to sing forth the hope of the gospel.

In John 14: 27, Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”

This Christmas, hear the news: you are more important than you may ever know. Someone needs you to have Christmas courage. Someone needs you to have faith when theirs is failing. Someone needs you to offer prayers that are both broken-hearted for the suffering, but also defiantly hopeful in the face of despair, loss, illness, and anguish. God is not dead, nor doth he sleep. The wrong shall fail, the right prevail. Someone nearly a thousand years ago had the insight to create a Christmas scene in a church apse that gave not the scene of Christ’s birth, but the truth of his nativity: the baby in the manger is the Savior God on the cross, reconciling the world to himself. The evil one will slap at us. The world will scream at us. The wicked whispers will tell us that all is vain. But we will ring the bells anyway. In the dark of the year and the cold of the night, we yet will ring out the message, “Glory to God in the highest, to him who sits on the throne! Peace on earth. Good will toward men.”

1 http://www.whatsaiththescripture.com/Fellowship/Edit_I.Heard.the.Bells.html