

Heavenly Peace

A Homily for Christmas Eve - December 24, 2018

Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker UU Church of Meadville, PA

The Christmas song *Silent Night* has long been a cherished part of our shared culture — in 2011 it was even granted UNESCO cultural heritage status. This year, the much loved hymn, written in Salzburg by Franz Gruber, celebrates its 200th birthday. But the power of the carol was never so clear as on Christmas Eve 1914, when fighting on the battlefields of World War I stopped - and a lone soldier's exquisite voice made history.

"It was impromptu, no one planned it," writes Stanley Weintraub, the author of *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce*. Soldiers wrote home to their families, to their wives, and to their parents, saying, "You won't believe it."

It has to begin with something, and it did begin with elements of shared culture. If it hadn't been for this, certainly there would have been no Christmas truce. It started with German officer, Walter Kirchhoff, a tenor with the Berlin Opera."

"He came forward and sang *Silent Night (Stille Nacht)* in German, and then in English. In the clear, cold night of Christmas Eve, his voice carried very far. "The shooting had stopped and in that silence he sang and the British knew the song and sang back." Gradually the troops crawled forward into No Man's Land," Weintraub tells us.

"The song had a deep impact on many of the soldiers. "Soldiers wrote home the day after to their families, to their wives, and to their parents, saying, 'You won't believe this. It was like a waking dream.'" "They recognized that on both ends of the rifle, they were the same."

"And of course, it was only ever a truce, not peace. Hostilities returned, in some places later that day and in others not until after New Year's Day. "I remember the silence, the eerie sound of silence," one veteran from the Fifth Battalion the Black Watch, Alfred Anderson, later recalled a reporter. "It was a short peace in a terrible war."

“As the Great War resumed, it wreaked such destruction and devastation that soldiers became hardened to its brutality. While there were occasional moments of peace throughout the rest of World War I, they never again came on the scale of the Christmas truce in 1914.”

“And though the Christmas Truce may have been a one-off in the conflict, the fact that it remains so widely commemorated speaks to the fact that at its heart it symbolizes a very human desire for peace, no matter how fleeting, through the shared singing of one beloved hymn, “Silent Night.”

If you are like me, you may be reflecting with dismay and sadness about how these men could trustingly enter a No Man’s Land, sharing music and fellowship, and then revert to the pursuit of killing one another. In some ways, it defies logic, not to mention decency, mercy, and fundamental regard for life itself.

They sang “Silent Night” in order to bridge their cultural differences with good will. And yet, they slept in relative (if not, heavenly) peace that night and that night only. What of this night? What is the state of the world as we prepare to sing it ourselves this evening by candlelight? Who is able to sleep in heavenly peace and who is not? Is it calm and bright for the innocent children of Syria or Yemen or those detained at our border?

Evangelicals have taken to Twitter and Foxnews.com to decry the politicizing of Christmas and whine that they just want to be able to coo over the baby Jesus in a “tender and mild” kind of way. I’d respond to that by saying that If Jesus was incarnated and born for the purpose that Christians believe he was, then he came to make us MORE aware of our need to be peacemakers, not to distract us from the violence and hatred around us with Cyber Monday, Muzak melodies, or Facebook Ugly Sweater contests.

We may want to believe (or already believe) that “Silent Night” was written by some random Austrian guy in 1818, who looked up from his strudel and said, “I’ll write a song about a calm and bright Bethlehem night and how tender and mild the world is around us. *Ja*, then we can all sleep in heavenly peace tonight.”

But this is far from the truth, not only of the origins of this much loved hymn, but also the conditions of the world at the time of Jesus’ birth or the times we live in today. I find it ironic, but not surprising, that as Austria celebrates this milestone, they have imposed some of the strictest limitations on refugees throughout all of Europe.

Let's remember that Jesus and his family were refugees, outcasts. He was born in a barn where animals offered greater hospitality than humans. The holy family absolutely embody liberation theology and the imperative to identify with the oppressed.

Oh dear, you may be thinking...is Rev. Robin going to ruin our Christmas with some downer of a message? I would say, NO, unless you consider a homily about being a peacemaker a killjoy.

What did Jesus famously preach in his sermon on the Mount? "Blessed are the peacemakers." Jesus grew up to be anything but mild. He was a rabble rouser, the first reformed Rabbi, a preacher and prophet with an open and inclusive tent. The babe became *that* man.

Jesus was anything but silent. As Madeline L'Engle tells us in her poem *First Coming*, "He did not wait till the world was ready. He did not wait until hearts were pure. He came to a world that did not mesh."

Pastor John Pavlovitz, a popular blogger, recently wrote a column called: "If Your Church is Silent Now, You May Want to Leave It." Speaking of Christmas Eve, he writes: "If there ever was a night when spiritual leaders should stand bravely in front of their faithful and speak the hardest of truths -- complaint and mass exodus be damned—it should be this one." So, here I am, speaking the truth in love.

Back on December 2nd, Josh Searle-White preached about the Puritans and commented on encroaching political correctness within our UU movement. Yes, I agree that we need to be mindful of laying it on too thick, yet I'd also argue that there is a lot of ground between indifferent privileged silence and a cringe-inducing "wokeness." We can consider hard truths together AND retire to the Parish House after the service to joyously consume our nog and cookies.

I was pondering all of this on Thursday evening as I attended a Christmas concert of beautiful Appalachian tunes at the Friends Meeting House in Pittsburgh. As fate would have it, I sat near a poster on the wall that explained The Quaker Peace Testimony...the Society's central tenet. It reads: "Friends have always worked to reconcile conflict and relieve the human suffering of war. While this good work must continue, Friends should also be working on measures to forestall future hostilities."

Whenever I pass the Friends Meeting House, I notice their yard sign that proclaims “War is not the answer.” When will we humans learn that War will never bring about peace, just victors and losers and casualties and broken societies.

A pamphlet I picked up that evening, entitled “Are You A Peacemaker?” offers us some guideposts to follow the star of non-violence and community building:

“Peacemakers speak the truth in love. Peacemakers forgive and offer grace to others. Peacekeepers don’t hold grudges, or have deep-seated resentments. Peacemakers initiate reconciliation. Peacemakers don’t wait for someone else or something else. Peacemakers don’t retaliate or seek revenge.”

“Peacemakers remain calm. Peacemakers take action against injustice and oppression. Sometimes in order to be a peacemaker a person appears to be a troublemaker. Jesus modeled this when he cleared the temple.”

“Peacemakers take a stand against “non-peace” and help to restore wholeness. Some define “sin” as “shalom” breaking. Anywhere or anytime wholeness or completeness is broken it is sin. I think it’s possible to be a really “nice” peacekeeper and to do harm by allowing brokenness to remain.”

“Becoming a peacemaker requires courage, intentionality, & perseverance. If you decide to become a peacemaker you will have to fight for it in your own life.”

As Lao –Tzu famously taught – “If there is to be peace in the world, there must be peace in the home. For there to be peace in the home, there must be peace in the heart.”

What truce might you call in your own life? In your heart? How are you at war with yourself and not even aware that your locked and loaded? What small act of peacemaking can you begin on this wintry Eve?

Will you wish upon a Christmas star with me that this time next year we will have brought our resources to the task of peacemaking, while speaking the universal language of Shalom, so that those the world over, whose lives are far from calm and bright, may sleep, at last, in earthly peace?

For as L’Engle reminds us,

“We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,

for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!”

Salaam. Shanti. Shalom.

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