

*Silent night, holy night,
all is calm, all is bright
round yon virgin mother and child.
Holy infant, so tender and mild,
sleep in heavenly peace,
sleep in heavenly peace.*

Actually, our translation of *Silent Night* is more poetic than literal. And there are other poetic translations out there. When our friends south of the border sing the song, they sing, "Noche de paz, noche de amor," literally "night of peace, night of love."

Night of peace. Heavenly peace. Peace.

We just heard the angel hosts proclaiming in our Gospel, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." A few moments earlier we heard in our OT lesson from Isaiah, "For unto us a child is born... and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

Peace on earth. Prince of peace. Sleep in heavenly peace.

When I was a baby I was baptized in my father's seminary chapel. And next door was the house of one of the greatest American poets, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Longfellow writes of the peace of Christmas,

*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 men!*

Peace on earth, good will to men.

This is my 21st Christmas to climb into a pulpit as a priest to proclaim the good news of Jesus' birth. But to be honest, I'm standing here before you tonight in the midst of a pretty fearful world. In some ways it's probably the most fearful Christmas I've experienced since being a priest, maybe more fearful even than it was in 2001.

So I think I know what some of you may be thinking tonight. "Peace on earth? Really?" You may be thinking, "That's a nice slogan, a nice sentiment, but get real. We live in a world of mass shootings, terrorist attacks, a world of ISIS and Al Qaeda. Peace on earth, sounds nice on a Christmas card. But it has no meaning in the real world."

As a matter of fact, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow struggled with the same difficulties. He wrote his poem on Christmas Day 1863, in the middle of the Civil War. Longfellow had recently become a widower--his wife had been burned to death in an accidental fire. And he had spent the weeks before Christmas at the bedside of his son, Charles, who was in

an army hospital. Charles had been shot in battle in the Civil War, and a bullet had gone through him clipping his spine. Though he would eventually recover, in December his situation was grave. Longfellow wrote this in December of 1863: "I have been through a great deal of trouble and anxiety." And his poem reflects that anxiety:

*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 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!"*

Some of you may be feeling that same way. I know I do at times. I see the headlines. I see what is going on in the world around us. And I think of this stanza from Longfellow again and again.

*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!"*

But the truth of the Christmas story breaks into our world of despair. The Christmas story is not about some sweet saccharin image of a cute little baby. This business about Peace on earth is not empty sentiment. This is not some vacuous Christmas card slogan.

Yes, we may be guilty of over-sentimentalizing our picture of the first Christmas, robbing it of its power. At the manger, on Christmas night, all may be calm, all may be bright round yon virgin mother and child. But Jesus was not born into a calm world.

Jesus was born in the world of the Roman empire, a brutal military dictatorship. Any peace in the Roman world was peace that was won by crushing any opposition with military might.

After Jesus was born, a puppet king in that empire, King Herod, a vicious tyrant tried to kill Jesus. Jesus and his family escaped to Egypt. But the other babies in Bethlehem were not so lucky. They were slaughtered.

30-some years later, that same Roman empire would execute Jesus. The sweet virgin mother who holds her baby in her arms at Christmas will later hold his dead corpse as he is taken down from the cross on Good Friday.

Later the Empire will persecute Jesus' followers. Many of those followers would be killed themselves for proclaiming that Jesus is Lord. This also is not an empty statement. In their world, everyone else proclaimed that Caesar is Lord. To claim that Jesus is Lord was to make a claim that Caesar no longer has ultimate power over them. The worst Caesar could do was kill them. But they were no longer afraid of death. Because death itself was defeated through the incarnation, and the crucifixion, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Jesus was born among us not to give us warm and fuzzy feelings once a year at Christmas time. He came that we might have life, true life, eternal life. And his Christmas gift to us is his peace, real peace, a deep peace that the world cannot overcome.

That gift means that nothing, not suffering, not hardship, not violence, not terrorism, nothing, not even death itself, can separate us from God's love for us. God promises that we can live in a new way in this life, trusting in him. God promises that we will live forever with him in the life to come, enjoying his presence forever. And that is a source of real peace.

Peace on earth. This is not some wimpy, sappy sentiment. This is at the heart of the heart of the Christian Gospel. This is at the heart of the Christmas story.

We heard the angel hosts proclaiming in our Gospel, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

And we miss out on the deep power of this statement. The word "host" is a military world. It is a word that means army. This is God's army coming in the midst of Caesar's occupying earthly army and showing who is really in charge. Peace comes not from Caesar. Peace comes from God.

And we heard from Isaiah, "Unto us a child is born... and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." The Prince of Peace is mighty. His rule is everlasting. And in the verses right before that, we are assured that when he comes again he will break the yoke of oppression. He will set things right. And the blood-stained boots and uniforms of warriors will one day no longer be necessary--they will be fuel for the fire. For the Prince of Peace will set things right.

Today, the Assyrian empire which Isaiah was worried about--it is gone.
The Roman empire that tried to stop the Prince of Peace by killing him--it is now gone.

Nazi Germany--it is gone.
The Stalinist Soviet Union--it is gone.
The Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot--it is gone.

And one day, ISIS and Al Qaeda will be gone.

And more importantly, one day evil, sin, death, will be gone, gone, gone. The wrong shall fail, the right prevail.

Those are actually Longfellow's words. He heard the bells on Christmas day proclaiming peace on earth. In despair he bowed his head, "There is no peace on earth," he said.

But then he proclaims the true good news of Christmas:

*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."*

*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 men!¹*

I don't know how you've been sleeping lately. I don't know if the situation in our world has kept you up at night. But tonight, when you go home, I hope that you can sleep in heavenly peace.

I hope that you can enjoy your time with your family or loved ones this Christmas. I hope you can open your presents and enjoy your usual Christmas traditions, basking in God's love, secure in God's peace.

God is in charge. Violence, oppression, terrorism, they shall end. Even death itself shall end. God has come into our world to offer his peace.

God offers a peace that the world cannot give. God offers a peace that the world can never take away.

Sleep in heavenly peace. Sleep in heavenly peace.

¹ I'm aware this "last" stanza is really the third stanza in Longfellow's poem. But I'm using the order in the powerful song version recorded by *Casting Crowns* "I Heard The Bells on Christmas Day," and think they may have gotten it more right than Longfellow originally intended.