

Heavenly Peace

The first sermon in the Advent/Christmas series

“Calm and Bright: 200 Years of ‘Silent Night’”

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December 2, 2018—First Sunday of Advent

- [Isaiah 32:15-18 Good News Translation](#) ¹⁵ But once more God will send us his spirit. The wasteland will become fertile, and fields will produce rich crops. ¹⁶ Everywhere in the land righteousness and justice will be done. ¹⁷ Because everyone will do what is right, there will be peace and security forever. ¹⁸ God's people will be free from worries, and their homes peaceful and safe.
- [Romans 15:13 \(Common English Bible\)](#) May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in faith so that you overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- [Sermon-in-a-sentence](#): In the example of Jesus we are urged to live as though heaven-like, heavenly peace prevails in our lives.

It's hard to imagine Christmas Eve without “Silent Night.” For most people that familiar carol defines Christmas Eve. Candle in hand. Trying not to squirm as you sit next to your little brother in the packed church pew, knowing that the sooner you get out of church that night, the sooner you can go to bed, and the sooner you can wake up on Christmas Day.

As the Christmas Eve service draws to a close, the room darkens only to be transformed by the warming glow of flickering candles, and children's voices blend with those of grown-ups in singing that gentle, hope-filled carol. Just imagining that moment makes us want to sing it now. But instead, I invite you to join me in *speaking* the words of the first verse of “Silent Night.” They're printed in your bulletin right beneath the sermon title. Let's speak the words in hushed voices, as if there were a sleeping baby in our midst:

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.

“Heavenly peace.” An existence that is heaven-like, heavenly. What you'd experience if you were “shadowing” God. *Worry?* No more. *Anxiety?* Doesn't exist. *Pain?* Gone. But right here in our lives, to experience heaven-like, heavenly peace – can we even imagine our world allowing that to happen?

We know human nature. We can be thoughtful one moment, self-centered the next. Our good intentions can find themselves pushed aside because some other priority gets in the way or we're too busy or we just forget. Even as we whisper a prayer for “heavenly peace” in our lives, the peaceful stillness of that moment might be broken by thoughts of a long list of holiday-related tasks to be done, or a remembrance of long-smoldering grievances against some family member or co-worker or neighbor. Our lives don't seem to encounter “heavenly peace” very often.

You may be familiar with a famous example of heaven-like, heavenly peace prevailing in our busy, self-righteous, instant-gratification world. It happened during the first Christmas of World War I. It's the now-famous “Christmas Truce” between the German and British armies opposing each other in the fields of Belgium. By December 24th, 1914 the fighting had been underway for five months. A Smithsonian Magazine article on the “Christmas Truce” described how

...[British] troops noticed at dawn [that] the Germans had placed small Christmas trees along parapets of their trenches. Slowly, parties of men from both sides began to venture toward the barbed wire that separated them, until—Rifleman Oswald Tilley told his parents in a letter home—“literally hundreds of each side were out in no man's land shaking hands....”

One common factor seems to have been that [German] Saxon troops—universally regarded as easygoing—were the most likely to be involved, and to have made the first approaches to their British counterparts. “We are Saxons, you are Anglo-Saxons,” one shouted across no man's land. “What is there for us to fight about?”

In the one detailed eyewitness account that survives – albeit in an interview not given until the 1960s – Lieutenant Johannes Niemann, a Saxon who served with the [German] 133rd, recalled that on Christmas morning:

the mist was slow to clear and suddenly my orderly threw himself into my dugout to say that both the German and Scottish soldiers had come out of their trenches and were fraternizing along the front. I grabbed my binoculars and looking cautiously over the parapet saw the incredible sight of our soldiers exchanging cigarettes, schnapps and chocolate with the enemy. Later a Scottish soldier appeared with a football which seemed to come from nowhere and a few minutes later a real football match got underway. The Scots marked their goal mouth with their strange caps and we did the same with ours. It was far from easy to play on the frozen ground, but we continued, keeping rigorously to the rules, despite the fact that it only lasted an hour and that we had no referee....

In most places, up and down the line, it was accepted that the truce would be purely temporary. Men returned to their trenches at dusk, in some cases summoned back by flares, but for the most part determined to preserve the peace at least until midnight. There was more singing, and in at least one spot presents were exchanged....

In the trenches occupied by the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, Captain Stockwell “climbed up on the parapet, fired three shots in the air and put up a flag with ‘Merry Christmas’ on it.” At this, his opposite number, Hauptmann von Sinner, “appeared on the German parapet and both officers bowed and saluted. Von Sinner then also fired two shots in the air and went back into his trench.”

The war was on again...¹

In the midst of that vicious war a vision of heavenly peace was glimpsed, if only for little more than a day and only in one part of that wide-ranging war. Men were able to overlook differences, set aside disagreements, extend and receive words and gestures of respect and friendship. Literally and spiritually they were able to rise up out of the muck of mud and prison of pride and reach out in common humanity to those who had been (and would again be) perceived to be enemies.

So what might it mean for us to declare our own “ceasefire”? What if we were to resolve to treat “enemies” as “friends”? And maybe “enemies” is too strong a word; maybe there are individuals or institutions or even self-imposed pressures and expectations that get in our way, that hold us back.

The lyrics of the carol offer a prayer that the precious infant would “sleep in heavenly peace.” I realize that it’s dangerous for a sermon to talk about sleeping. But imagine sleep as a metaphor for putting to rest the emotional ammunition that puts us on edge and keeps us on a fight-or-flight alert. What if we were to ask God for the courage and strength to put to rest resentments, suspicions, irritations, impatience, disappointments that cause us to pick at one another and even fight with ourselves? Why couldn’t we try to live *as though* heaven-like, heavenly peace prevails in our lives?

In the selection we heard from the Book of Isaiah this morning the prophet envisioned how the world would be different as people allow God’s Spirit to fill their hearts and guide their lives:

¹⁶ Everywhere in the land righteousness and justice will be done. ¹⁷ Because everyone will do what is right, there will be peace and security forever. ¹⁸ God’s people will be free from worries, and their homes peaceful and safe.²

How could Isaiah write, “Because everyone will do what is right, there will be peace and security forever”? Isaiah was envisioning the ideal, not describing his situation or ours. We know all-too-well that *everyone* is *not* doing “what is right.” But what could happen if we strove to do that? Isaiah said, “Peace and security forever.” Heaven-like, heavenly peace certainly is not our reality most of the time, but let it be our aspiration, our hope. For this reason God of Heaven became flesh so that in Jesus of Nazareth we behold God-in-human-form. In the example of Jesus we are urged to live *as though* heaven-like, heavenly peace prevails in our lives. Let it truly be our prayer that God’s way will become our way – “on earth as it is in heaven.”

[Sermons: se20181202; © 2018 Jon M. Fancher]

¹ Mike Dash, “World War I: 100 Years Later--The Story of the WWI Christmas Truce,” December 23, 2011 at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-story-of-the-wwi-christmas-truce-11972213/#VdT8pARz1b6mDpM.99>, accessed 11/30/18.

² Isaiah 32:16-18 (GNT)