

I HEARD THE BELLS ON CHRISTMAS DAY**Isaiah 9:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25**

Intro: We don't often sing I HEARD THE BELLS ON CHRISTMAS DAY on Sunday mornings, though Lori just played it for our offertory. We don't sing it at our Christmas Eve service either, or even while we are Christmas caroling since it's just not a Christmas Carol that is in our booklet for when we travel around every year. It's not because it's not a good song or theologically incorrect, it's just a heavy song that's not something we necessarily want to stand around the Christmas tree and sing. However, it is a song that we often hear on Christmas albums that is usually sung with the feeling it engenders. This is good, because there's quite a story behind it.

When I was a kid, when someone would make an unintentional rhyme, someone would invariably call out, "He's a poet and he don't know it, but his feet show it, they're long fellows." And that was about all we knew about Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. And the truth is, none of us knew how big his feet were or if they were big at all. But in his day, which was from 1807 to 1882, Longfellow was well known as a writer and a poet. And it is he who was the author of this Christmas song we're looking at today which, obviously is, I HEARD THE BELLS ON CHRISTMAS DAY. It's a good thing to learn about it because so much went into the song and so much is behind the words, that we rarely think about as we listen to our Andy Williams or Johnny Cash, or Harry Belafonte, or Frank Sinatra, or Casting Crowns records. I want you to know the rest of the story, because it's really good to know the story behind songs.

This is a sad poem that has a longing for peace and normalcy. Listen to it as I read the words:

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 thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
 Had rolled along
 The unbroken song
Of 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!

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
 And with the sound
 The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
 And made forlorn
 The households born
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!”

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.

Times were rough in the 1800s. In fact it is less than 100 years ago, in 1928, that penicillin was discovered and suddenly infection wasn't as dangerous. Babies often died in infancy, and young moms often died in childbirth. As a matter of fact, Longfellow's first wife, Mary, died from a miscarriage at age 23. They had only been married 4 short years.

A couple years later Longfellow fell in love with a young lady by the name of Francis (Fanny) Appleton. She wasn't as interested in him, but finally, after 7 years, she decided that marriage wasn't that bad after all, and certainly marriage to Longfellow would be interesting, so they married. They were very happily married for 18 years, until, in 1861, as she was sealing envelopes with an open candle, her dress caught fire, and she was quickly engulfed in what became a fatal fire. Longfellow was in the next room and heard her screams, and attempted to extinguish the fire but was unsuccessful. In fact, he was burned so badly that he couldn't even attend Fanny's funeral, and the burns to his face were so bad that that he grew a beard to cover the scars. So, no, he wasn't trying to look like Santa Claus.

In 1847 he and Fanny had lost a child, also named Fanny, at less than 1 year old, and now he had lost his beloved and muse who was also his editor and the one whom he bounced ideas off of, and she was even his scribe for some of his writing because his sight was poor. Needless to say, his despair was deep.

You may recall, if you know history, that something else significant happened in 1861 – the Civil War began and nation was torn in two. In March of 1863, without permission from his father, Longfellow's oldest son, Charles, whom everybody called Charlie, quietly left home and traveled from the Longfellow home in Cambridge Massachusetts, to Washington, DC, where he attempted to enlist in the Union Army. It turned out that he still needed his father's permission, which he received, and he became a private in the Union Army. However, it was soon obvious the kind of skills he had, and he was given an officer's commission of 2nd Lieutenant and command of a cavalry unit. During the summer of that same year he came down with camp fever which was probably either typhoid or malaria, and he was very ill for quite some time and as a result missed the bloodbath at Gettysburg. When he rejoined his unit in August of that year, he began to see action and he was wounded severely during a skirmish on November 27, 1863.

His father received word of this on December 1 and he and Charlie's brother traveled to be with Charlie whose wounds were severe enough that had the bullet gone 1 inch to the left he would have been paralyzed, and probably the wound would have been fatal.

It was with these tragedies in mind from his own personal life, and the horrible suffering caused by the Civil War raging in the South that caused Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to write the poem that I just quoted to you as he was sitting with his slowly recovering son on Christmas Day of 1863. Of course things looked very bleak. The war would wear on for another 15 months, and after that, just days after Lee's surrender at Appomattox, in fact, President Abraham Lincoln would be assassinated.

Even though he didn't know this since it hadn't happened yet, it is why Longfellow had such a bleak attitude as he penned these words. But, notice, even through all the despair, and through the blasts of cannons and the earthquake of turmoil from families by the thousands that were losing their sons, Longfellow had hope in the fact that God is still on the throne. Yes, hate is strong, but God is stronger. Yes, there is no peace, but there **will be** peace. There will be goodwill because God will prevail.

This song has been described as being raw and real – and it is. One writer says that “*it's a Christmas song that doesn't cover up the world with holly and tinsel and say everything is just fine.*” In fact, a lot of the programming that we watch would imply that if everybody just celebrated Christmas every day of the year we would be free of all trouble. The trouble is Satan is still busy, and without Jesus, peace on earth is impossible.

Longfellow was in a black mood, but he doesn't leave the world broken, he shows that wrong will fail and right will prevail. And that is why Christmas is joyful . . . for people who know Christ.

Sharon read from Isaiah 9 earlier with its seven verses full of hope. The gloom referred to in verse one will no longer be present because it will be replaced by a great light. Now, this is interesting because the previous chapter is full of tragedy. When you read it, and I hope you do, you see that God has instructed Isaiah write down some harsh words about the people of God who have rejected him. The chapter ends with, *And they will look to the earth, but behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish. And they will be thrust into thick darkness.* Isaiah 8:22 (ESV). But immediately, in the next verse, which is the first verse of chapter 9, there is the promise that *there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish.* Isaiah 9:1a. This is because God doesn't leave us hanging in our tragedy. He has a plan and it's this:

For to us a child is born,

to us a son is given;

and the government shall be upon his shoulder,

and his name shall be called

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,

Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and of peace Isaiah 9:6-7a

Strife will cease. Wars and preparation for war will be burned up as fuel for fire. Joy will be the new normal. The plan is the victory of the Messiah.

David Guzik quotes Gayle Erwin who asks: "What might such a government look like? First of all, it would look like its king. Politicians of this day look for what they can get from you. Jesus looks for what He can do for you.

- Leaders of this day surround themselves with servants. Jesus surrounds us with His servanthood.
- Leaders of this day use their power to build their empire. Jesus uses his power to wash our feet and make us clean and comfortable.
- Leaders of this day trade their influence for money. God so loved that he gave...
- Generals of this day need regular wars to keep their weapons and skills up to date and insure their own advancement. Jesus brings peace and rest to hearts.
- The higher the plane of importance one reaches in this world, the more inaccessible he becomes. Jesus was Immanuel, "God with us."

This is God's plan.

Joseph and Mary had plans too

Listen (Read Matthew 1:18-25)

You have heard this story for as many Christmases as you have been in Church but let me quickly review:

Mary was engaged to Joseph. She was a very good and godly young lady. But suddenly she was pregnant. We know more about that from what we have read in Luke 1, but here in Matthew 1, we see that Mary was betrothed to Joseph.

Let me quickly explain the three steps of marriage in the Judaism of Matthew 1:

- *Engagement*: This could happen when the bride and groom to be were quite young, and was often arranged by the parents.
- *Betrothal*: This made the previous engagement official and binding. During the time of betrothal the couple were known as husband and wife, and a betrothal could only be broken by divorce. Betrothal typically lasted a year.
- *Marriage*: This took place after the wedding, after the year of betrothal.

Joseph and Mary were in the one year, middle step here in Matthew 1:18-25 where our text tells us that before their marriage was consummated, she was found with the child from THE HOLY SPIRIT. This was not good and on top of that:

This wasn't part of Mary's plan. But as we know from Luke 1, when the angel explained God's plan to Mary, her response was "*Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.*" Luke 1:38.

Joseph had other plans too. He was a good man. In fact, he was so good, that even though he could have dragged Mary through the shame of a very public divorce, our text says that, *being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly*. Matthew 1:19.

Joseph was like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow who had such high hopes for a long life and a big family with his first wife, Mary. But those plans were dashed by her death as she miscarried their first child. His pain was palpable, at one point he wrote in a letter "*One thought occupies me night and day...She is dead – She is dead! All day I am weary and sad*".

There is no doubt in my mind Joseph's grief at this perceived betrayal. By all the appearances Mary had been unfaithful, and such unfaithfulness causes a grief that has a similar depth to that of the loss of a loved one. Because after all, it is great loss. The person has died to you but they're still there for you to see and wonder what might have been? Joseph's plans were dashed.

But it turns out his plans were dashed by the better plans of the Holy Spirit. Matthew 1:18 says that Mary was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. David Guzik writes, "Matthew plainly (without the greater detail found in the Gospel of Luke) presents the virginal conception and subsequent birth of Jesus. However, the virgin birth was difficult for people to believe back then, even as it is also doubted now by some." And then he quotes Adam Clark with, "Her situation was the most distressing and humiliating that can be conceived. Nothing but the fullest consciousness of her own integrity, and the strongest confidence in God, could have supported her in such trying circumstances, where her reputation, her honour, and her life were at stake."

Yes, this is not what Mary planned.

Yes, this is not what Joseph planned.

But the angel, who, according to Luke, had already appeared to Mary, came to Joseph in a dream, and in that dream, all plans changed.

"Joseph, don't fear to take Mary as your wife. The baby she is carrying, is from the Holy Spirit."

"Joseph, the son that Mary is carrying will save his people from their sins. And for that reason you must name him Jesus." a name which means The Salvation of Yahweh. This is how Peter could say later in Acts 4:12, there is no other name under heaven by which men must be saved except the name of Jesus.

"Joseph, my plans are better than your plans. Your plan was to have Mary with you, and you will. But now God's plan is to have God with us, Emmanuel."

Our text tells us, *When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus*. Matthew 1:24-25.

Joseph, who often almost gets forgotten in the shuffle of Christmas, was as obedient as his dear wife was.

Wrong failed, and right prevailed. It was God's plan.

That is why we can sing I HEARD THE BELLS ON CHRISTMAS DAY and be impressed by the hope expressed in the words of a grieving man who knew God does all things well. Amen.