

The Christmas Truce

In the year of our Lord 1914, peace on earth was in short supply. Sleep was in short supply...fresh food...especially dry boots were in short supply all along the Western front. The British and the Germans had already settled into the trenches where they would spend the next four years. Mud was so deep that they sank up to their knees amid mortar shells, rats, and the unburied dead. Men died every day but neither side gained an inch of ground.

Why were they fighting? No one could remember. Horribly, no one really had intended it.

At the outset of the war, the Germans had seen themselves as highly cultured, a race of composers, poets and philosophers, and scorned the British as a nation of shopkeepers; while the British had imagined that they were the civilized ones and the Germans merely Huns. By now, whatever the passions back home, the fighting men had forgotten to hate each other; sometimes they would call out greetings or jokes to their counterparts only a few yards away.

On December 19, 1914, in one part of the line, Germans came out of their trenches with their hands up, signaling that they wanted to bring in their wounded. According to a British lieutenant,

The Germans then beckoned to us and a lot of us went over and talked to them and they helped us to bury our dead. This lasted the whole morning and I talked to several of them and I must say they seemed extraordinarily fine men...It seemed too ironical for words. There, the night before, we had been having a terrific battle and the morning after, there we were smoking their cigarettes and they smoking ours.¹

Just before Christmas, a frost fell, the mud froze, and snow began to cover the scarred landscape. Over on the German side, soldiers put Christmas trees above their trenches and hung them with candles. The guns fell silent on the 24th. Here and there, songs could be heard. Conversations began at a distance, the Germans speaking in English; and amazingly, spontaneously, the men came out of the trenches.

They shook hands, showed photographs of their families, exchanged chocolates and cakes and tobacco, took pictures with each other. Maybe because the fight was on French soil, the French were at first reluctant to join the peace, but for days afterwards they and a company of Bavarians traded bread, cognac, postcards, and newspapers.

No one authorized the Christmas truce; in fact the commanding officers tried to stop it, without success. The fighting men themselves made it happen, all along the Western front.

On December 25, when the mist cleared, officers were stunned to see German and

¹ Weintraub, Stanley. *Silent Night: the Story of the World War I Christmas Truce*. New York: The Free Press (a division of Simon and Schuster), 2001, p. 5

Scottish soldiers in No Man's Land, actually playing soccer. The Scots played in their kilts, and when gusts of wind showed they had on nothing else, the Germans roared with laughter. The players finished with the Germans ahead three goals to two, and then both sides warmed up with schnapps.

Nightfall brought more music – *Tipperary* was a favorite, also *Die Wacht am Rhein*, and *Silent Night*, sung in English and its original German.

And that is how Christmas came in the year of our Lord 1914.



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It's remarkable how peace breaks out. It doesn't seem to come on command. Can you think of an instance where some officer or ruler ordered peace and got it? One may defeat an opponent; but as cycles of violence have shown, one can't pacify others in any lasting way by force of arms.

Rather, peace breaks out when peace breaks in – when people start to see each another as human beings.

Long ago – or not so long ago – Israel was occupied by the Romans, and evil was done on both sides, by the great occupying army as well as the terrorists in the hills. Into this explosive place, God brought a new way. It was such a radical answer to strife that we don't often recognize it as a political answer. It's easier for us to think of Christ's birth as a pretty story.

But this child was a descendant of King David, which raised the possibility that he would claim power. As if to recall that shepherd-king, shepherds told of a miraculous visit: how an angel brought these shepherds good news of a great joy that was for *all* the people. Not just the Hebrew people. *All* the people.

“Suddenly there was with the angel,” says Luke, “a multitude of the heavenly host,” meaning a heavenly army. (The Psalms had spoken of the Lord of hosts, mighty in battle.) But this heavenly army said nothing about defeating the Romans; it sang, *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace.*

The shepherds were changed. Others, too. Consider old Simeon in the Temple, greeting the newborn with an enormous sigh of happiness. He had waited a lifetime for

the messiah, and now he said, "Lord, you are dismissing your servant in peace." It was happening within him. Peace was breaking in.

He might have been echoing the prophet Isaiah, who had sung,

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion. Break forth into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. *Isaiah 52: 7-10*

Isaiah's prophecy had been realized without force of arms, or any kind of force at all. This child, this man Jesus, would never lead an army. In place of revolution, he would speak of repentance, forgiveness and love. His message would not be widely accepted – in fact, he would die at the hands of those who ruled by force – but against all odds his message has survived to challenge the usual way of doing things.

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Six years ago, our country suffered a terrible attack. There are people in this meetinghouse who experienced the horror first-hand. Countless lives have been changed because of it. Perhaps you worked in lower Manhattan. Or you know someone now serving overseas.

As we have learned, some evils must be resisted by force. But we may have over-learned that lesson. War has not brought out the best in us. Unfortunately, embarrassments like this week's revelations of torture have turned out to be more than just occasional slips. They happen to all nations in wartime, because war by its very nature insists that we see other people as less than human. After all, we're told, that is how they see us.

As of this week, the most conservative estimate of the cost in American and Iraqi lives now exceeds 90,000.

Despite our greatest efforts, peace has not broken out. But maybe, just maybe, this will be the season when it breaks in, if we follow this tough-minded advice:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. *Romans 12: 14-18*

This is not the usual way of nations. It requires the courage of a warrior. But wouldn't we rather demonstrate a capacity to live in a dangerous world without losing our souls?

As it is, we are stuck in the trenches, with no end in sight in this year of our Lord.

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On Christmas Day, 1914, the English were under strict orders not to fraternize with the enemy. But then, as the fog lifted, a handful of Germans came out along one point of the line and cried, "Don't shoot. We don't want to fight today. We will send you some beer." Sure enough, to the astonishment of the British, the Germans rolled a keg into No Man's Land.

English and German officers had been told to keep their men in the trenches. Not all the soldiers obeyed, however, so the officers met in No Man's Land and agreed to a day's cease-fire. The Germans insisted that the English take the beer ("Take it," they said, "we have lots"), while the English responded with tins of plum pudding. There were salutes all around. As the officers raised glasses and toasted each other, men on both sides cheered. For the rest of the day the battlefield resounded with Christmas carols. How right it was for them to celebrate, Saxons and Anglo-Saxons, for after all, even the King and the Kaiser were cousins.

But on December 26th, wrote a British captain, came a hard frost. After breakfast he fired three shots in the air and held up a flag that said "Merry Christmas." His German counterpart replied with a sheet that said "Thank you." The two men bowed and saluted. Then the German fired two warning shots to recommence the War.

It would go on for another four years, with 37 million killed or wounded.

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God has offered us another way. This may be the year when people of all faiths give it a try.

The angels still promise good news of a great joy which is for *all the people*, peace on earth, goodwill to *all people*. When we come out of our trenches and greet our former enemies, it will be in a land called No Man's because it is God's.