

“The Christmas Truce of 1914”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
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Christmas Eve

*And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host
praising God, and saying,
Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men [& women].*

Luke 2:13-14

John 1:1-14 ; Luke 1:26-38; Luke 1:39-45; Matthew 1:1-8;
Luke 2:1-7; Matthew 2:1-9a; Luke 2:8-20; Matthew 2:9b-12
Let us pray... O God,

Praise to you, our guiding Light, evergreen Peace, abiding Love, and defiant Joy!
May Christ be born anew in our hearts; May peace prevail on Earth;
May your goodwill inspire goodwill in turn...

Amen

A few weeks ago, one of our church members, Jan Schmeichel,
did a “Children of God Sermon about the 1914 Christmas Truce of WWI.
It occurred when the German advance west
was stopped by the French and British.

Trench warfare developed to counter the sweeping fire
of machine guns that were a new technology.

Both sides were deadlocked and began to realize this would not be a short war
as they languished through the autumn into winter.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_I

It is hard to imagine the hardship and death that had been suffered by both sides
in those first months since war broke out in August 1914.

Hundreds of thousands on both sides were already dead, wounded, or missing
by December.

Weintraub, Stanley. *Silent Night*. [2002] xvi

Many, many more combatants and civilians would eventually be casualties –
statistics made worse by the technological advances of airplanes,
armored tanks, and machine guns.

I don't want to dwell on the misery – though it is important to acknowledge this,
as we try to put such an era into perspective with our own time
and how the remarkable events of the Christmas Truce of 1914 arose
and what that may suggest...

There had been calls for the antagonists to proclaim a Christmas truce,
but both sides dismissed this as ‘impossible’.

One article in an American publication wrote disparaging this suggestion, saying:
“The stench of battle should rise above churches
where they preach good-will to men.

A few carols, a little incense, and some tinsel will heal no wounds’,
and that such an observance of a truce at Christmas would be a mockery.

LWeintraub, Stanley. *Silent Night*. [2002] xvi

Willard, p.2

Meanwhile, in the trenches,

despite the misery of living in unsanitary trenches filling with freezing water,
the bitter weather keeping it that way,
the probing attacks across No Man's Land,
as well as artillery and sniper fire punctuating the stalemate,
there were frequent occasions of fraternization.

This would take the form of bantering back and forth with jokes and insults
between trenches 60 yards apart – and sometimes to allow one another
to retrieve their wounded, help bury each other's dead,
and trade cigarettes.

The senior command on both sides frowned on these informal
truces as breaches of discipline, but this still went on.

However on Christmas Eve, something happened,
and it happened all along the Western Front,
from Belgium south through the Flanders Fields,
then east to France's border with Germany
and it happened spontaneously in a variety of ways
from the bottom, up the chain of command, in defiance of orders.

There were some unique conditions that allowed for what would follow –
For one thing, there was a common heritage of Christianity between
the Germans, the French, and the British in that they all shared
the custom of celebrating the birth of the Christ Child.

Contingent on this, the folks back home provided the resources
or the “ammunition” if you will.

Large numbers of evergreen trees had been shipped from Germany
to their boys on the front lines.

Tins of chocolate and other goodies had been sent by the royal families
of both sides.

Also, the weather changed on Christmas Eve to be clear and cold,
providing a ‘hard frost’ making it easier to walk on in and outside the trenches.

<http://www.1914-1918.net/truce.htm>

There had still been hostilities through the day,
but an example of how the truce began went like this:

“In the beginning was the Word” as the Germans were celebrating Christmas
by singing carols from their tradition – including “Stille Nacht”
which the British recognized as “Silent Night” and joined in singing.

In one instance, a great opera singer was among them
and serenaded both sides.

“Then there was Light” - after dark on Christmas Eve, as Germans set up
Christmas trees filled with lit candles all along their ramparts.

Willard, p.3

All of a sudden, the British saw a light approaching,
coming across the No Man's Land between them.

It was a German soldier carrying a small Christmas tree filled
with many small lit candles.

A British officer went out to him and together negotiated a ceasefire;
And the soldiers on both sides came out to greet one another
even though they didn't know each other's language,
but shared gifts of food, tobacco, and newspapers from home.

A classically trained violinist put on a concert
and then they all got around to playing a game of football – or soccer.
With the morning light, they could see the bodies of friend and foe alike
which proved to be a sobering realization;
And together, they buried their comrades.

It didn't happen like this everywhere,
but for many places along the Western Front, it happened.
The powers that be on both sides did their best to discourage the Truce
from happening in the first place or from continuing.
Fresh troops were brought in and the dynamics were changed
to restart the mechanisms of the 'offensive spirit'.

<http://www.1914-1918.net/truce.htm>

I am personally drawn to such stories of those who cross the abyss
of race, religion, politics, and poverty to build bridges between people.
This story reminds me of a story from the Crusades in the 13th Century,
when Francis of Assisi crossing the desert to speak words of peace
to the Egyptian sultan, Malik al Kamil.

I am reminded of our president, Jimmy Carter, bringing
Anwar Sadat, the president of Egypt together with
Menachem Begin, the prime minister of Israel,
to forge a peace between their countries that is still in place.

I wonder how such examples can be applied in our own time
in the midst of the terrible divides that exist along the fault lines
of race, religion, politics, and poverty.

Then I remember what someone told me a long time ago about how Christ crossed
the abyss of sin and death to reconnect humankind with God.

We Christians believe that God entered this world as one of us
to overcome the divisions between us and God, between us and one another,
and within us between egotism and one's true self.

We Christians *of the United Church of Christ* believe that one day
humankind may all be one and that, no matter where any of us are
on that journey, God welcomes and forgives us
and wants us to do the same for one another.

Willard, p.4

The first time I heard the story of the WWI Christmas Truce was at a charity concert given by folk singer John McCutcheon at Mystic Congregational Church in CT. As it says on John McCutcheon's website, his song "Christmas in The Trenches" was 'Inspired by a back-stage conversation with an old woman in Birmingham, AL...'

*My name is Francis Tolliver, I come from Liverpool,
Two years ago the war was waiting for me after school.
To Belgium and to Flanders to Germany to here
I fought for King and country I love dear.*

*'Twas Christmas in the trenches where the frost so bitter hung,
The frozen fields of France were still, no Christmas song was sung,
Our families back in England were toasting us that day,
Their brave and glorious lads so far away.*

*I was lying with my messmate on the cold and rocky ground
When across the lines of battle came a most peculiar sound
Says I, "Now listen up, me boys!" each soldier strained to hear
As one young German voice sang out so clear.*

*"He's singing bloody well, you know!" my partner says to me
Soon one by one each German voice joined in in harmony
The cannons rested silent, the gas clouds rolled no more
As Christmas brought us respite from the war.*

*As soon as they were finished and a reverent pause was spent
"God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" struck up some lads from Kent
The next they sang was "Stille Nacht," "Tis 'Silent Night'," says I
And in two tongues one song filled up that sky.*

*"There's someone coming towards us!" the front line sentry cried
All sights were fixed on one lone figure coming from their side
His truce flag, like a Christmas star, shone on that plain so bright
As he bravely strode unarmed into the night.*

*Soon one by one on either side walked into No Man's land
With neither gun nor bayonet we met there hand to hand
We shared some secret brandy and we wished each other well
And in a flare-lit soccer game we gave 'em hell.*

*We traded chocolates, cigarettes, and photographs from home
These sons and fathers far away from families of their own
Young Sanders played his squeeze box and they had a violin
This curious and unlikely band of men.*

*Soon daylight stole upon us and France was France once more
With sad farewells we each began to settle back to war
But the question haunted every heart that lived that wondrous night
"Whose family have I fixed within my sights?"*

*'Twas Christmas in the trenches, where the frost so bitter hung
The frozen fields of France were warmed as songs of peace were sung
For the walls they'd kept between us to exact the work of war
Had been crumbled and were gone for evermore.*

*My name is Francis Tolliver, in Liverpool I dwell
Each Christmas come since World War I I've learned its lessons well
That the ones who call the shots won't be among the dead and lame
And on each end of the rifle we're the same.*

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Amen