

“What comes next?”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Isaiah 9:2-7 and Luke 2:1-20*

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Christmas has always been my favorite holiday. I love the candlelight worship, the carols, the bright colors sparkling beneath the snow, the family and friends gathered around the Christmas tree. I love its spirit of generosity, its kindness—the fact that on this day we are all brothers, all sisters, none divided, none inferior. I love what Christmas represents—a light shining in the dark, a ray of hope, the moment when God became one of us, when love and grace broke into our hurting world and made us whole again.

Christmas is when we set aside all other distractions and focus on what really matters in life: each other, our souls, God. There’s an intimacy to Christmas. A closeness.

I admit, though, that my capacity to hold onto the Christmas spirit seems to wane more quickly each year. Just take a trip to Wegmans the day before Christmas Eve, and you’ll be back in the real world of human depravity, right quick. Seriously, it’s like *Lord of the Flies* over there.

If we’re lucky, we’ll get a moment or two each year when we feel the Christmas spirit. And we’ll think that if we could just hold onto that feeling, if we could just stay there, nestle into its warm love, we’d be so much happier. And then tomorrow hits. The alarm sounds. The kids yell. The bills pile up. The kitchen needs to be cleaned. The boss is as annoying as ever. The news blasts the latest terror or scandal. Our time, energy, and attention are thrust in a thousand directions. And slowly we settle back into a lonely and rushed existence. We go back to accepting a world built on injustice and division.

It reminds me of the ceasefire that spread across the western front of World War I during the Christmas of 1914. Five months into a war that was supposed to be done by Christmas, thousands of French, German, and British troops bravely stepped out of their trenches to greet each other and celebrate the birth of Christ. They sang carols, played soccer, exchanged gifts, and joined in burying their dead. It was a brief moment of peace in a brutal war. It began when British and French soldiers heard the Germans singing “Silent Night” and wishing their enemies a “Merry Christmas,” their voices floating across that narrow way, that small deadly space between the trenches.

In a letter home, Private Frank Sumter of the London Rifle Brigade, wrote, “We could barely reach through the wire... We shook hands, and I had the experience of talking to one German who said to me, ‘Do you know where the Essex Road in London is?’ I replied, ‘Yes, my uncles had a shoe repairing shop there.’ He said, ‘That’s funny. There’s a barber shop on the other side where I used to work.’... It’s ironic when you think about it, that he must have shaved my uncle at times and yet my bullet might have found him and his bullet might have found me.”

Something miraculous happened that day. Men in trenches, commanded to kill each other, met and witnessed to one another's humanity. They shared photos of family and promised to meet each other after the war, exchanged names and addresses. They talked about how they wanted the war to be over. On that cold Christmas morning, the Prince of Peace was born, a lord more powerful than nations, more powerful than death.

But it was not to last. Quickly, the commanders of the various armies intervened and ordered their men to start fighting again. As the fighting continued, becoming ever more terrible, the men were less and less likely to honor these truces. By 1918, 10 million soldiers would be dead.

All of which makes me wonder: What good is this peace, this joy, if it doesn't survive the night?

When the prophet Isaiah declares that a child is to be born unto us, a child who shall be called the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, he's not talking about a brief interlude in a cruel world. He's talking about the intervention of God, for the salvation of the world. He's talking about a change that's supposed to last more than a few hours. It's supposed to reach into the heart of who we are and shine a light that never goes out. In this "endless peace," the mud-splattered boots of warriors and their garments rolled in blood are burned, never to be needed again.

Justice and righteousness and the permanent rule of Christ, that is what we celebrate this night.

When the shepherds see the child Jesus and feel the first amazement of Christmas, they do not stop there. They accept that their lives will never be the same. They return, glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard.

If indeed the Christ child is born into our lives tonight, then we should know, as any parent knows, that this is just the beginning. This child is going to live with us, grow with us, love us, need us, for a very long time.

Will we be like those who see glory and then return to their old lives—a falling star, a firework in the sky gone in a second? Or will we burn on, like those shepherds of old, letting our lives be remade in the glory and praise of God, while telling all of what we have seen and heard?

In Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, the Spirit of Christmas Present says to Ebenezer Scrooge, "Mortal! We Spirits of Christmas do not live only one day of our year. We live the whole three-hundred and sixty-five. So it is true of the Child born in Bethlehem. He does not live in men's hearts one day of the year, but in all days of the year."

There's nothing special about December 25. There's no magic to it. The only reason it gives joy and brings us closer to God and to each other is because we allow it to. Because, for one day each year, we cease with our striving, and allow God to be God. We turn the day over to family, to charity, to grace. We say no to work and agendas. We take the time to observe what is good and beautiful, what is just and right, and we give thanks.

The possibility for a Christmas life is already here. It's born tonight. All we have to do is empty our hands of all the other stuff that's filling them up and turn them over to God, letting God place Christ in our hands today, tomorrow, and every day to come.

Here in the trenches—while the bombs of suffering explode around us, while divided peoples rage and war, commanding us to do the same—we can persist in singing our “Silent Night,” in shouting out, “Merry Christmas!”

Indeed, though most of the French, German, and British soldiers during World War I resumed their fighting, some found ways to institute unofficial truces, continued moments of peace, in defiance of a world committed to destruction.

We can do the same. It just requires the same intentionality, the same openness, that we give to Christmas Day. Each day, we have to make the choice to focus our eyes on God. To set aside time that has no agenda, no goal other than simply appreciating that moment, that breath, that gift. To practice hospitality and kindness. To walk with the lonely or the hungry. To say thanks and pray each day, to spend time with family or friends or community, to read Scripture, to notice the beauty right in front of us.

If such daily intentionality seems too difficult, you're in luck. Because there's already a day each week set up for you to celebrate Christmas year-round, to revel in the incarnation, to rest in God's peace and joy, to know the love and justice of a community in worship. It's called the Sabbath. Every Sunday morning, we set aside the distractions of life, gather here, brothers and sisters, to turn our focus to God and neighbor.

Once in 1914, the sound of Christmas voices singing “Silent Night” was powerful enough to change the world, briefly. What do you think would happen if Christ were to sing through us, every day of the year? What would happen if we never stopped singing “Silent Night”? I don't know about you, but I'd like to find out. **Amen.**