

First Unitarian Church

December 24, 2020

Tensions had been brewing for years, but the war had only just started that summer. The first battle took place in August. Soon trenches, as deep as you are tall and deeper, had been dug, and filled with soldiers.

Life in the trenches was terrible, full of rats, mud, injury, and worse. It smelled horrible. There was destruction all round—rubble, blackened trees, evidence of explosions. The trenches held water and muck, and just being in them led to illness. Think of how your fingers and toes get wrinkly in a swimming pool. Now picture that pool filled with mud, and your swim lasting for months.

The trenches on the front lines were often only yards away from the enemies' trenches. You could stick your head up and see them there, if you dared, off in the distance but not too far. And the ones on the front lines were under fire all the time; bullets and cannonballs passing back and forth. The area in the middle, between one side's trenches and the other's, was called no-man's land. Anyone passing through there was completely exposed. Barbed wire marked the edge of each side's trench-warfare turf.

The first battle had been in August. Now, four months later and just past the winter solstice, the troops were tired. The days were so short, the nights so long. There were sixteen hours of darkness, and only eight hours of light. Yet the soldiers had a hard time sleeping. It was freezing cold, for one thing. Everyone was sick, for another; which was serious because antibiotics had not yet been invented.

And then, weirdly, even though the whole situation was miserable and dangerous, a lot of the troops' time was spent in boredom, just... waiting for something to happen. They were scared and bored. It was a combination of boredom and fear, like a pandemic lockdown, but worse. Way worse.

The governments and loved ones back home sent things to try to lift the troops' spirits. They sent tins of pudding, cans of corned beef, cans of beer, letters, postcards, and things like that. Those acts of kindness mattered a lot, though in truth, the soldiers were already pretty tired of canned food.

And they were still homesick. But now it was Christmas eve. The human spirit is strong, just like the spirit of Christmas. So some of them strung up lights above the trenches. (They had been there so long, the enemy already knew where they were). Some of them found

evergreen boughs or trees and hung them up too, and decorated them with candles. The soldiers didn't have much to decorate with, but the trenches were so ugly, that this unexpected beauty really stood out. In fact it looked extra beautiful because everything around it was so bleak. Soon, in spite of everything, the troops were feeling the Christmas spirit. They felt the Christmas spirit, and most importantly, most importantly of all, they had a tendency to sing.

Music is one of those things that no one and nothing can take away from you, not even a war; not even a pandemic. Even if you can't sing in a choir, and even if you can't use your single voice or even tap out a beat, even then you can still hear music in your mind. A song can express your feelings, give you energy, or remind you that others have faced similar challenges before. Music connects us with our spirits and our cultures. Songs tell stories, some of them very old and important. Music can be a form of prayer, or an invitation.

One of the soldiers who was in the trenches that Christmas Eve near the French town of Armentières (ar-**men**-tee-ay) described what happened next.ⁱ He was a British rifleman named Graham Williams and he was on duty watching over no-man's land. There in the mud and the moonlight, a calm had settled over the battlefield. Graham was thinking about what a very different Christmas it was going to be from any he had spent up 'til then. He thought of his father back home. He knew that at that moment, his father was probably making his traditional Christmas rum punch. "I could go for some of that rum punch," Graham thought to himself. He was feeling so miserable.

Then all of a sudden, lights appeared all along the other side's trench. The other side was the Germans, and no sooner had their lights turned on than they started singing *Stille Nacht*. We know that song. In English we call it *Silent Night*. Graham woke up his fellow soldiers to hear what was happening. When the Germans finished their Christmas carol, the British soldiers applauded, and then with the feeling that, as Graham put it, they "must retaliate in some way," the Brits replied by singing *The First Noel*. (Can you hear it in your mind?) When they finished, the Germans applauded and launched into *O Tannenbaum*. Back and forth they went with caroling, until the British began to sing *O Come All Ye Faithful*, at which point the Germans joined right in singing along with the Latin verse. The two opposing sides both knew the Latin, and they were singing the same Christmas carol, together, in the middle of a war.

In fact, all along the western front, not everywhere but in many places, the two sides began spontaneously connecting. Up and down the battlefield, soldiers emerged cautiously. White flags were raised. People who had been enemies just that morning shook hands and spoke to each other. Some played soccer.

Another soldier, Frank Richards, recalled that his area's Christmas truce started when his side held up a board that said *Merry Christmas*, and then the other side did the same. They noticed no one was shooting. When a man from the other side walked into no man's land

with his hands up, someone on Frank's side threw down his equipment and went out to meet that guy. Soon everyone came out. One of the people in charge, a commander for the company, was opposed to this—everyone was supposed to be fighting after all, it was a war! So the commander tried to stop the two sides from greeting each other. He threatened to shoot anyone who participated, but the troops told him he was too late. In no man's land, they talked about their shared misery, and how they hoped the war would not last much longer. They traded pudding and beer. They exchanged hats and gloves. Some exchanged addresses and promised to write letters after the war. Some of them went on to really truly do that.

Now, like that commander, many of the officials in charge were not happy about this. In fact, a couple of weeks earlier Pope Benedict the 15th had suggested the fighting pause in honor of Christmas, and the warring countries had refused to do any such thing. It seems government leaders didn't like the idea either. And yet, in defiance of orders, the soldiers had initiated a sudden peace on their own. In one instance, when they were ordered to fire on each other, they merely pretended. They yelled across no man's land for everyone to duck, and then, on purpose, they aimed too high; and when it was their turn the other side did the same. Afterward, the truce resumed.

Each side had been told that their enemies were monsters. That they had no morals! They must be fought! Yet what the soldiers encountered in no man's land were fellow humans. Their differences, though very serious, were not the whole story. In fact, there were no monsters. Only people, lonely, each hurting in their own way, each longing for warmth and home.

I wish I could say the Christmas Truce of 1914 marked the end of the fighting. But we who look back from the future, from the year 2020, know that the Great War, as it was known then, would go on for four more years. And then, it would be followed by another one that was so large the two terrible wars would come to be known as World War I and World War II. Many other things would also happen between then and now; some good and some bad.

In 2005 the last known person who had taken part in the Christmas Truce died. Alfred Anderson was a World War I veteran who lived in Scotland. Back in the trenches when he was just 18 years old, he must have feared greatly for his life. Yet he lived to be 109. When he died, the story became ours to carry on, and we are still telling it, along with another Christmas story, that much older one about a tiny baby who was born in a stable and became a great healer and teacher. Who wanted to bring healing to the world.

Humans have been telling the story of Jesus' birth for almost 2000 years. We have been telling the story of the Christmas truce for 100 years. Jesus seems like a long time ago, but the ratio puts it in perspective. For every 20 days humans have been telling the story of Jesus, we've been telling the story of the Christmas truce for one day. One led to the other,

and we think of them as so long ago, but when we put them in this perspective, we see that maybe what's more true is that they are not long ago at all. They are still happening now, we are still living them, and later generations, speaking from the future, will tell what happens next.

Here is what we know from these stories, as we tell them in 2020:

That seeing the humanity in each other is always right. It is never wrong. No matter how divided we have become.

And that history is unpredictable. You never know what is going to happen. God shows up in a family no one wanted to let in. Peace breaks out in the middle of a war. It makes no sense and all the sense.

That unpredictability is sometimes deeply unsettling. This year has reminded us of that. But it is also why we should never give up hope.

The words of the poet,

Not much triumph going on here—and yet
There is much we do not understand.
And my hopes and fears are met
In this small singer holding onto my hand.
Onward we go, faithfully, into the dark
And are there angels singing overhead? Hark.ⁱⁱ

Will you join me in a Christmas prayer?

Spirit of life,
source of peace and strength,
Mystery called by a thousand names,

Pour your love down on this weary world.

In the psalms, it is written: though tears may last through the night, joy comes in the morning. Let it be so.
Let all who are suffering,
All who are frightened, or grieving,
be comforted.

Let love pour down on them.
Let love pour down on this world tonight,
And let it be seen passing from one person to another.

Spirit of the Turning Year,
It has been a painful time.
Hold us in your tender mercy
as we long for each other's embrace,
as we breathe, as we strengthen and endure,
and lean into the months to come.

Spirit of Bright Stars and Gentle Moon,
of Planets Shining like Christmas Stars,
illumine history's unfolding path,
and help us to see you in each other's faces;
all of us,
dreamers, misguided idealists, wagers of war and peace,
all children from the same source.

We give thanks for our lives, for our loved ones, and for all the blessings that sustain us. We give thanks for one another. And we pray for the wisdom and the courage to make our lives a blessing upon others, through our manner of being in the world.

All this we offer as our common Christmas prayer,
Amen.

ⁱ First hand testimonies are from the BBC World Service podcast, "Christmas Truce. Witness History: Archive 2010."
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00cjl5>

ⁱⁱ Gary Johnson's poem, "December." Here's one place you can find it:
<https://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php%3Fdate=2011%252F12%252F22.html>