

A SERMON PREACHED ON DECEMBER 9, 2018, AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN  
CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

We've now settled into Advent, and I don't need to tell you that we are less than three weeks away from the gold star day of Christmas. Our first Christmas card arrived on November 29, and thanks to Guy and Peggy we got to celebrate last night what is hopefully the first of our pre-Christmas parties going into 2019. May the joy of our gathering help bring peace to the world. We certainly need it. It often begins at home. Here is a short remembrance of how peace made its way through a little girl's life one Christmas a short time ago. She lived with her father and siblings (her mother had died a few years back); he was a simple man who worked very hard just to keep food on the table for his small family. He often came home angry and depressed. His little five-year old daughter would pray every night for peace from his temper and bad moods. Some nights, she was so afraid!

One year, a few days before Christmas, he punished her after learning that she had used up the family's only roll of expensive gold wrapping paper. As money was tight, he became even more upset when on Christmas Eve he saw that the child had used all of the expensive gold paper to decorate one shoebox she had put under the Christmas tree. He also was concerned about where she had gotten money to buy what was in the shoebox.

Nevertheless, the next morning the little girl, filled with excitement, brought the gift box to her father and said, "This is for you, Daddy!"

As he opened the box, the father was embarrassed by his earlier overreaction, now regretting how he had punished her.

But when he opened the shoebox, he found it was empty and again his anger flared. "Don't you know, young lady," he said harshly, "when you give someone a present, there's supposed to be something inside the package!"

The little girl looked up at him with sad tears rolling from her eyes and whispered: "Daddy, it's not empty. I blew kisses into it until it was all full."

The father was crushed. He fell on his knees and put his arms around his precious little girl. He begged her to forgive him for his unnecessary anger.

An accident took the life of the child only a short time later. It is told that the father kept this little gold box by his bed for all the years of his life. Whenever he was discouraged or faced difficult problems, he would open the box, take out an imaginary kiss, and remember the love of this beautiful child who had put it there. It gave him peace.

In a very real sense, each of us has been given an invisible golden box filled with unconditional love and kisses from our children, family, friends and God. There is no more precious possession anyone could hold.<sup>i</sup>

Of course this story finds meaning in the gospel reading for today. "Do not be afraid," said the angel to the shepherds in the fields. "I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people." It's a good thing that they listened to what the angel had to say, for they were terrified! Even though Luke tells us at the beginning of his gospel that "it was a time of great expectation," they weren't expecting heavenly bursts and talking alien-like creatures! It was as if the sky had exploded! One of the older translations puts it succinctly, saying "they were sore afraid." But the angel's good news, as quoted in the prophet Isaiah, gave them solace. Isaiah proclaims "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!" The shepherds and the people hearing this story as it was read from the temple knew what the message meant, so they left their flocks and went to view the Christ child, he who the angels were to call the "Prince of Peace." That is why we reenact the crèche scene, at the manger, so we can remember what peace means in a world that seems to have forgotten. That is undoubtedly due to the fact that our relationship with God is strained, or perhaps totally absent. So, interestingly enough, the deeper, more foundational meaning of peace is "the spiritual harmony brought about by an individual's restoration with God."<sup>ii</sup> Got God, got peace, you might say. It's no wonder we pray for peace and note our prayers on Christmas cards. Peace becomes present in the asking....

Last year I shared with you the story of the American and German troops who held a truce on Christmas day and beyond in an effort that it might demonstrate the power of peace, especially at the holidays. Here is another tale, from the annals of American history. On July 9, 1861, tragedy struck the home of America's

most popular poet. That morning, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's wife, Fanny, was near an open window sealing locks of her daughter's hair in a packet, using hot sealing wax. It was never known whether a spark from a match or the sealing wax was the cause, but suddenly her dress caught fire and engulfed her with flames. Her husband, sleeping in the next room, was awakened by her screams. He desperately tried to put out the fire and save his wife. He was severely burned on his face and hands.

She, tragically burned, slipped into a coma the next day and died. His grievous burns would not even allow him to attend her funeral. He seemed to lock the anguish within his soul. Because he continued to work at his craft, only his family knew of his personal suffering. They could see it in his eyes and observe his long periods of silence. His white beard, so identified with him, was one of the results of the tragedy - the burn scars on his face made shaving almost impossible.

Although a legend in his own time, he still needed the peace that God gives to His children. On Christmas Day, three years following the horrible accident - at age 57 - he sat down to try to capture, if possible, the joys of the season. He began:

*"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."*

As he came to the third stanza he was stopped by the thought of the condition of his beloved country. The Civil War was in full swing. The Battle of Gettysburg was not long past. Days looked dark, and he probably asked himself the question, "How can I write about 'peace on earth, good will to men' in this war-torn country, where brother fights against brother and father against son?" But he kept writing - and what did he write?

*"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!"*

It seems as if he could have been writing for our kind of a day. Then as all of us should do, he turned his thoughts to the One who solves all problems - the One who can give true and perfect peace, and continued writing:

*"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."*

And so we have the marvelous Christmas carol 'I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.' A musician named John Baptiste Calkin wrote the musical setting that has helped make the carol a favorite. The writer of this remembrance ends by saying, "just as that Christmas in 1864 was made better for Longfellow, may we experience a Christmas that will be the greatest ever. May we actually find the peace that Longfellow wrote about in the carol - true peace with God, for this is one of God's greatest gifts to us."<sup>iii</sup>

Lest you think I only know sad stories with tragic endings that get redeemed by the gift of peace, a gift of Christmas, this is a true story, as told by Pastor Bob Reid from his congregation in New York City.

The brand new pastor and his wife, newly assigned to their first ministry to reopen a church in suburban Brooklyn, arrived in early October excited about their opportunities. When they saw their church, it was very run down and needed much work. They set a goal to have everything done in time to have their first service on Christmas Eve.

They worked hard, repairing pews, plastering walls, painting, etc., and on December 18th they were ahead of schedule and just about finished. On December 19th a terrible tempest - a driving rainstorm - hit the area and lasted for two days. On the 21st, the pastor went over to the church. His heart sank when he saw that the roof had leaked, causing a large area of plaster about 20 feet by 8 feet to fall off the front wall of the sanctuary just behind the pulpit, beginning about head high.

The pastor cleaned up the mess on the floor, and not knowing what else to do but postpone the Christmas Eve service, headed home. On the way he noticed that a local business was having a flea market type sale for charity so he stopped in. One of the items was a beautiful, handmade, ivory colored, crocheted tablecloth with exquisite work, fine colors, and a cross embroidered in the center. It was just the right size to cover up the hole in the front wall. He bought it and headed back to the church.

By this time it had started to snow. An older woman running from the opposite direction was trying to catch the bus. She missed it. The pastor invited her to wait in the warm church for the next bus 45 minutes later. She sat in a pew and paid no attention to the pastor while he got a ladder, hangers, etc., to put up the tablecloth as a wall tapestry. The pastor could hardly believe how beautiful it looked and it covered up the entire problem area.

Then he noticed the woman walking down the center aisle. Her face was like a sheet. "Pastor," she asked, "where did you get that tablecloth?"

The pastor explained. The woman asked him to check the lower right corner to see if the initials *EBG* were crocheted into it there. They were. These were the initials of the woman, and she had made this tablecloth 35 years before, in Austria.

The woman could hardly believe it as the pastor told how he had just gotten the tablecloth. The woman explained that before the war she and her husband were well-to-do people in Austria. When the Nazis came, she was forced to leave. Her husband was going to follow her the next week. She was captured, sent to prison and never saw her husband or her home again. The pastor wanted to give her the tablecloth; but she made the pastor keep it for the church. The pastor insisted on driving her home, which was the least he could do. She lived on the other side of Staten Island and was only in Brooklyn for the day for a housecleaning job.

What a wonderful service they had that Christmas Eve! The church was almost full. The music and the spirit were great. There was a wonderful feeling of peace all throughout the church. At the end of the service, the pastor and his wife greeted everyone at the door and many said that they would return.

One older man, whom the pastor recognized from the neighborhood, continued to sit in one of the pews and stare, and the pastor wondered why he wasn't leaving. The man asked him where he got the tablecloth on the front wall because it was identical to one that his wife had made years ago when they lived in Austria before the war and how could there be two tablecloths so much alike? He told the pastor how the Nazis came, how he forced his wife to flee for her safety, and he was supposed to follow her, but he was arrested and put in a prison. He never saw his wife or his home again all the 35 years in between.

The pastor asked him if he would allow him to take him for a little ride. They drove to Staten Island and to the same house where the pastor had taken the woman three days earlier. He helped the man climb the three flights of stairs to

the woman's apartment, knocked on the door and he saw the greatest Christmas reunion he could ever imagine.<sup>iv</sup> What peace and joy locked hands that night!

As Norman Vincent Peale once said, "I truly believe that if we keep telling the Christmas story, singing the Christmas songs, and living the Christmas spirit, we can bring joy and happiness and peace to this world."<sup>v</sup> Let us begin those tasks in the days ahead, and start the Christmas revolution!

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<sup>i</sup> adapted from <https://www.wanttoknow.info/goldwrappingpaper>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.gotquestions.org/Prince-of-Peace.html>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.inspire21.com/stories/holidaystories/AGiftofPeaceandHope>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.inspire21.com/stories/holidaystories/christmasreunion>

<sup>v</sup> [http://www.searchquotes.com/search/Christmas\\_Peace/#ixzz5YmBbahKK](http://www.searchquotes.com/search/Christmas_Peace/#ixzz5YmBbahKK)