

The wrong shall fail, the right prevail
November 28, 2021 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

I had so much fun last week with 'Good King Wenceslas' that I thought I'd do it again. Jennifer is going to play a tune for us – you tell us what it is.

We know these songs, don't we? We've sung these songs year after year to the point that they've become a part of us. And yet, the really neat thing is that year after year, something new jumps out at me. A word or a phrase or an idea tucked away in the song really stands out for me and I think – 'that is so cool – I need some time to think about it' – but before you know it, the song goes and you're into the next verse.

So what I want to do this Christmas is to take the time to think about some of those ideas. This Advent season, we're going to take a handful of lines out of Christmas carols and 'unwrap' them. We're going to think about where they come from and what they mean in the Bible. And then we're going to take the next step to think about what they mean for us.

So today we're going to start with a line from 'I heard the bells on Christmas day' (Henry Wadsworth Longfellow) – The wrong shall fail, the right prevail.

Now before we get started, I would love for you to hum the tune for me. Everybody, hum the tune for 'I heard the bells on Christmas Day.' So, I heard this – (ascending version) and I heard this – (older version). How many of you know it the first way? How many the second?

The second one came first; that's the more traditional tune. But then in the 1950's Johnny Marks came along and wrote the first version and then Bing Crosby recorded it and now that's a little more familiar. Now, do you know what else Johnny Marks wrote? Rockin' around the Christmas Tree, Have a Holly Jolly Christmas, and then there's one that's pretty obscure – Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer - he was a prolific Christmas songwriter. But, we're not here to talk about the music, we're here to talk about the words, so let's take a quick peak at the lyrics. They're in the bulletin if you want to follow along.

These words were written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow back in 1863. So if you will, imagine Longfellow, sitting back in his most comfortable chair on Christmas morning. The snow is gently falling outside; the fire is crackling in the hearth and the poet is reflecting on Christmases past and present. In the distance, he hears the church bells ringing out, maybe 'Joy to the world,' and he starts to reflect on the world around him. He writes:

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth, goodwill to men

That's the angels' song, isn't it? When the angels appeared over the fields in Bethlehem, they sang out, loud and clear, wild and sweet – peace on earth, goodwill to men. It was God's way of announcing to the world that He Himself had come for the benefit of all people, in the person of His Son, born as a baby in Bethlehem. And those ARE wild and sweet words. Just think about it - the all-powerful, everlasting God of all Creation, the God of the Heavens and Earth gave up the riches of the heavenly throne room and came via feeding trough into the world He had made, in the form of a helpless little

baby, all to reconcile sinners back to Himself. And that's all tied up in those famous words - peace on earth, goodwill to men. Longfellow continues, verse 2.

I thought how as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along the unbroken song
Of peace on earth, goodwill to men.

Do you know what a belfry is? It's a bell tower – it's the part of the church that holds the bells that ring to announce the Saviour's birth. And Longfellow rightly recognizes how long those bells had been ringing.

By the time Longfellow lived, 'Joy to the world' was more than 150 years old. And of course, the angel's song was nearly two thousand years old. That message of peace of earth, goodwill to men had rolled along through every generation, the message of Christmas made known to people in all times and places.

But then, something interesting happens. Longfellow stops and compares the announcement of 'peace on earth, goodwill to men' with the reality of the world around him. And he writes in verse 3 –

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."

Now this is very much rooted in Longfellow's own experience. Longfellow lived during the American Civil War, a terribly brutal and bloody war that introduced the terrors of mechanized warfare to the world. No longer would guys be stabbing each other or shooting guns that took a few minutes to reload; they had machine guns now, they had mechanized weapons that could mow down men like wheat. And what's more, the Civil War was a terribly divisive war. Cousins fought cousins, neighbours fought neighbours and brothers fought brothers. Longfellow's own son ran away from home to join the fighting against his father's wishes.

So when Longfellow says 'There is no peace on earth today. There is only hatred and conflict and the taunting denial that there could ever be unity amongst peoples,' he is speaking from experience.

And it's an experience we know all too well too, isn't it? Hatred often has the upper hand and self-interest often trumps the interests of all people. I think of the missionaries still being held hostage in Haiti; I think about abusers who are still walking free; I think about family conflicts that threaten to turn Christmas into a war zone and I see where he's coming from. All too often, 'the wrong' prevails.

But then in verse 4, we see a reason for hope -

Yet pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor does he sleep;
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
With peace on earth, good will to men."

In verse 3, Longfellow gets all discouraged because the world around him seems to deny the possibility of 'peace of earth,' but then the bells interrupt his discouragement to call his attention back to their song and the realities behind it.

God is not dead. God is not asleep. He is biding His time. 2 Peter would say 'He is giving people time to repent.' And the day is coming when the wrong SHALL fail and the right WILL prevail and there will be peace on earth and good will to all people.

And we know that will happen, because Jesus has promised to make it happen. Yes, He came once and the bells on Christmas Day remind us that He did, but they should also remind us that He will come again. And that's when the Wrong will ultimately fail.

This is what makes this a really good Advent carol. Advent is all about arrivals. Jesus came once as a baby and that's why we have the Christmas carols. But Jesus will come again, to fulfill the promises He made at His first coming, to complete the work He started the first time around. As surely as Jesus came once as a baby, He will come again as a conqueror to set all things right. "The wrong shall fail" because Jesus will return and overthrow every evil actor who has ever lived and will ever live.

And we get a picture of that in Revelation 20. You know, around Christmas, we have this picture in our minds of Jesus as a little baby tucked into the hay; we should really also have this picture in mind too because this is what it'll look like when He comes again. Revelation 20, starting in verse 11:

11 I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war.

12 His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself.

13 He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God.

14 The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean.

15 Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.

16 On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

...

19 Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army.

20 But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur.

21 The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh.

(Rev 19:11-21 NIV).

On that day, Jesus will establish the peace and goodwill that the bells promise for good. The wrong shall fail, the right prevail.

But first, we will all be called to give account to the Lord of all and it will all come down to what we do with the knowledge of Jesus' first advent.

Jesus came that first Christmas, to save sinners, to bring us back to God, that we might look with faith on Him and live; He will come again, a second time, to rescue all those who will live for Him and to obliterate anyone who ignores His grace and persists in sin. The wrong will fail, the right prevail because Jesus Christ will come again.

Let that be an encouragement to you. Let that give you hope. When you look around at the world around you, and you see cheaters prospering and liars winning, remind yourself, the wrong shall fail, the right will prevail, when Jesus Christ comes again.

It can be so easy to say ‘everybody else is cutting corners to get ahead, why should I act with integrity and honesty?’ It’s because Jesus will come again. The first time He came, He delivered me from sin, He delivered you from sin and set us apart from the darkness of this world and the wrath that is to come. We want to live in a way that is consistent with that. We want to be agents of peace on earth and good will to men, even as people around us get ahead by cutting corners. Sure, maybe hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men, by our actions, we can sing even louder – the wrong shall fail, the right prevail with peace on earth, good will to men.

Then, ringing singing, on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime, a chant sublime,
Of peace on earth, good will to men!

Let that be your voice. Be the voice of peace and goodwill to the world. The wrong shall fail, the right prevail when Jesus Christ returns again.

BENEDICTION

7 Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; do not fret when men succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes.

8 Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret--it leads only to evil.

9 For evil men will be cut off, but those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land.

10 A little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look for them, they will not be found.

11 But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace.

Psalm 37:7-11

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