

Tonight, I want to share a story with you, a little bit about the life...of Henry. I have to warn you up-front, though; it's not your typical, upbeat Christmas Eve tale, more of a story of hard times and sorrow than a wonderful life. It was Christmas Eve in Henry's hometown of Cambridge Massachusetts, and Henry was walking, just...walking. He was deeply troubled in heart; to him, it seemed like the whole country was. Conflict dividing people, dividing households; both sides condemning the other as unfeeling toward others' needs, angry, hate-filled, evil even.

That wasn't his only concern; bless Henry's heart, he'd been through a lot. He was still grieving over the greatest tragedy of his life. His wife, Frances, was working on some crafts, using melted wax from a candle. Somehow her clothes caught on fire, and she ran into Henry's home office for help. He wrapped her in a throw rug to quench the flames, a rug much too small to make a difference. In desperation, he threw his arms around her, trying to put out the flames with his own body. Too little, too late. Frances died the next day, with Henry's face, arms, and hands left permanently scarred, so injured he couldn't even attend his wife's funeral.

Less than three years later, just shy of Christmas, Henry was notified his oldest son Charles was severely injured in the military. That Christmas came and went, and Charles survived his wounds, but would live with pain the rest of his life.

So that next Christmas Eve came, and Henry walked...just walked, all the way til the church bells of Cambridge signaled the dawn of Christmas Day. So it was that Henry - Henry Wadsworth Longfellow - in a land deeply divided in the midst of the Civil War, went home and wrote these words:

*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
And thought how, as the day had come, The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along The unbroken song Of peace on earth, good-will to men
And in despair I bowed my head "There is no peace on earth," I said;
For hate is strong, & mocks the song Of peace on earth, good-will to men*

Longfellow was 57 when he wrote those words, same age I am; and in all my years, I have never seen the country so deeply divided. We live in a time where hate is strong. We see the fruits of hate all around us: anger, violence and fear for the future, civil wars and terrorism; even the protests seem to be more about hating someone or something than love trumping hate. The scripture comes back to me again and again: ***"Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."*** And there are many in our country whose heads are bowed in despair.

But do you know the other words that Longfellow wrote - ones that ended up in the song we know as "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day"?

*Then pealed the bells more loud & deep: "God is not dead, nor doth He sleep
The Wrong shall fail, The Right prevail, With peace on earth, good-will to men."*

Some say it was Abraham Lincoln being reelected; some think it was seeing how close the war was to being over; I think it was Christmas and the healing that God brings. But somehow, through all that Longfellow had been through, he found the hope of Christmas, the light at the end of the tunnel.

Christmas is so much more than the trees and presents; more than a fleeting feeling of peace on Earth, Goodwill to men; more even than a baby being born in a manger. Christmas is about the light coming into the world, Jesus the light of the world.

He's the light of life, reminding us that there is something beyond the life we know here and now. He's the light of grace, the undeserved blessing that falls upon those on whom God's favor rests. He's the light of joy, joy to the world for those who receive its king. He's the light of hope that dispels despair with the assurance that the right shall prevail. And He's the light of love, love that overcomes hate just as light overcomes darkness.

That light has been passed on to us. Jesus tells all who follow Him, ***“As you have the light, believe in the light. Then the light will be within you, and shining through your lives. You'll be children of light.”***

So if this world of darkness and sin, this world of anger and violence and fear, is ever to know true Light and true Love, it will be seen in us. We need to show love to even to those we disagree with, even with those different than us, even with those we find unlovable. We need to shine the Light of Truth, God's Truth, the truth of the Gospel - that God is not dead nor doth He sleep - truth shared in love, not in judgment. We need to hold onto God's promises, that he does have a future for us: abundant life here and now, with eternity to come - a future that includes Christ returning, when the right will prevail once and for all. And in all of this, we need to be in communion with - and in the power of - God's Holy Spirit, or the Glory of God in our actions will be faint indeed.

The Word - God's heart, God's will, God's Light - became flesh and made his dwelling among us. And we who walk in the light of His light, we have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. May we be the ones who roll along the unbroken song of peace on earth, goodwill to men.

John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God-- children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Isaiah 60:1-3

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth

and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Isaiah 42:16

I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them.

1 John 5-7

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

John 8:12, 12:35-36a

Jesus spoke saying, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." "For a brief time still, the light is among you. Walk by the light you have so darkness doesn't destroy you. If you walk in darkness, you don't know where you're going. As you have the light, believe in the light. Then the light will be within you, and shining through your lives. You'll be children of light."