

I Believe in Hope: Longfellow's "Christmas Bells"
First Sunday in Advent, Sunday November 29, 2020

Advent is my favorite season. I say this every year, but this year especially, we need its reminder that only after sitting in the places without light, the places of doubt, worry, fear, and despair, can we see the light. I find it telling every year that though the society around us rushes into full Christmas mode on the day after Thanksgiving - or even earlier - in the life of the church we observe a season before Christmas, a season of stillness, of waiting, of peering, of hoping. This year Advent meets us where we are, as we look to a long cold winter of time apart from those we love, as we worry about our nation's future, and mourn those who have died and suffered under this pandemic and our continuing history of racism. This would be a hard year to go into the full-blown joy of Christmas. I for one am not ready right now to proclaim "Joy to the World." Are you? We need December songs in a minor key before we can modulate to the major ones.

But we do need the music. Music encourages, music connects, music returns our past to us and helps us believe in the future - a future this year when we will sing again together. And though it isn't safe for us to gather this year in our beautiful sanctuary to sing carols old and new, we can still fill our hearts with music. This year in our Advent services, we'll be leaning into the music of this season particularly music of our Unitarian Universalist tradition. We will be looking at how certain carols offered signs of hope, love, peace, and joy in their times, and still sing of them in our own.

We begin this Sunday with the carol we know as *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day*. It's a shortened version of a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow called *Christmas Bells*. Longfellow wrote it after taking a walk on Christmas Day 1863 while he pondered the message of the bells chiming from the church steeples of Boston and Cambridge.

1863. You know from that date that the Civil War was on Longfellow's mind as he took that walk. A fierce abolitionist, Longfellow also loved his country and was sad at the way it was being ripped apart. He had come to believe that the war was necessary to free the slaves and restore the Union - but at what cost? Though the Union had won many of the battles, the outcome of the war was still very much in doubt. And there had been so many battles and so many killed. Longfellow mourned all of them, and mourned with many of his friends whose sons had died, young men who had been part of Longfellow's extended family.

But he mourned more than their deaths and the fate of those held in slavery. His eldest son Charley had enlisted in the Union army in the spring of that year. In July he had almost died of what was called camp fever, probably typhoid. Longfellow had traveled to Washington where Charley had been lodged in the home of a Unitarian minister and there he nursed his son back to health. In August, Charley returned to the army and Longfellow resumed his worries for his son. On December 1, as he and his family were finishing dinner, a telegram was delivered, informing him that Charley had been seriously wounded at a battle in Virginia on November 29th, so 157 years ago today. The telegram said -incorrectly- that Charley had been shot in the face. When Longfellow and his younger son Ernest arrived in Washington, they learned eventually that Charley had been shot in the back with the bullet traveling through his back,

leaving entrance and exit wounds, and missing his spine by less than an inch. Shortly before Christmas, with his son well enough at last to travel, Longfellow brought him home to Cambridge for what would be a long recuperation. So the near loss of his son and the question of whether he would make a full recovery were in Longfellow's heart as he listened to the bells.

But his heart held yet more grief. In July of 1861, his wife Fanny had trimmed their daughter Edith's hair. (In his poem *The Children's Hour* about his love for his three daughters, Longfellow refers to her as "Edith with golden hair.") She wrapped up the snipped curls in paper to preserve them and went to seal the packet with hot wax. As she tilted the candle over the paper, some of the wax landed on her very flammable muslin dress. A breeze fanned it into flames. Though Longfellow tried, even with his own body, to put out the flames, Fanny died the next morning, leaving her husband scarred in body and in spirit.

Christmas, which Fanny had loved, and which had been a time when they opened their doors to welcome family and friends, became an especially hard time for him. The first Christmas after Fanny's death, he wrote in his journal, "How inexpressibly sad are all holidays." The entry for the next Christmas, 1862, reads: "A merry Christmas' say the children, but that is no more for me." The Christmas of 1863 was blank. Perhaps his energy went into writing the poem instead.

The poem begins with his listening to the bells ringing out a "sweet" message of peace on earth, goodwill to all, and then arguing with the possibility of sweet peace. He thinks of

*[the] cannons thunder[ing] in the South,
And with the sound
The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!*

*It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn
The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!*

These verses, which tie the poem to the war, were left out of the carol when it was later set to music. But hearing them, we are reminded of just how hard it was for Longfellow and others also grieving the war, the tragedy of slavery, and their own losses to feel hope. So many had been left "forlorn." "Forlorn" comes from an Old German word: "for" meaning "completely" and "lorn" meaning "to lose." So "forlorn" isn't just "sad." It means "feeling as if you'd lost everything" or everything that matters to you.

From that emptiness of hope and joy, Longfellow argues back to the bells:

*"There is no peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"*

But the bells have the last word, reminding him that they are not saying all is well now. They are ringing out a message not of sweet simple peace, but of that deep peace which comes when we realize that we are not alone in our sorrow or our suffering, when we realize that we are held by a love which knits us together within ourselves and to one another. Longfellow, one of our great Unitarian poets, reminds us that we are not handed peace but are called into the work of peace, together embodying our hope for that world where all live in the fulness of shalom, of good will. Though he never stopped grieving for his wife, his hope carried him, enabling him to continue offering his vision of unity, justice, and love in his poetry.

- Pamela M. Barz