

## **“Better Than a Truce”**

Liturgical Date: Christmas Eve

Primary Texts: St. Luke 2:1-20; Isaiah 9:2-7

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary texts for tonight, this Eve of the Nativity of our Lord, are the Gospel Lesson from St. Luke 2 and the Old Testament Lesson from Isaiah 9. The title of this evening’s sermon is “Better Than a Truce.”

I want to take you back in time tonight to a time long ago. Of course pastor, we remember that blessed night in which Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem. Yes, but before we get there I want to take you back to a place and time that is long past but is not 2,000 years ago, but 105 years ago to the day. The date is December 24, 1914. At this time in history, the Western world was on fire. Although still in its early stages, a conflict that would cost around 16 million lives was raging. The Allies of Russia, France, and Britain squared off against the Central Powers of Germany, the Hapsburg, and Ottoman Empires. This was World War I, then known as “The Great War.”

The war was so deadly, in large part, because old tactics of armies facing off on fields met modern weapons like airplanes, poison gas, and deadly rapid-fire machine guns. Battle lines would stagnate with muddy and to say the least, uncomfortable, trenches dug for protection sometimes with opposing armies only a few hundred feet apart. To step out into the “no man’s land” between the trenches was an act that would likely end in death.

As I said the time was December 24, 1914, and the place was the Western Front in Belgium. It was Christmas Eve, but far from home and with “Peace on Earth” seeming like an impossible dream British and German forces were in their respective trenches. It was in this setting that something so unexpected would happen, that if it were not a true historical event you would not believe that it happened. Truth is often stranger than fiction. What happened that Christmas Eve night of 1914 could be classified as a “Christmas Miracle”.

Remember that these armies were a relatively short distance apart. About 10 PM British troops began to hear sounds from the German lines. It was singing. And it was a familiar tune. The very words that we will sing later this evening pierced that cold December air, *“Stille Nacht, Stille Nacht...Schlaf in Himmlischer Ruh., Schlaf in Himmlischer Ruh”*. They were singing *Silent Night*. Some of the British troops began singing the hymn in English. Then the soldiers began yelling back and forth across no-man’s land. *“Come over here. You come halfway, I come halfway. You no shoot, I no shoot.”* Unbelievable as it may seem, the two sides that were recently shooting at each other came together for what became known in history as the “Christmas Truce.”

The soldiers began communicating with each other the best that they could. Christmas trees were lit. Carols were sung. Greeting of “Merry Christmas” and “Frohliche Weihnachten” rang out. The truce extended into Christmas Day. One enterprising British soldier even set up a barber shop, trading haircuts for German cigarettes. Then someone broke out a soccer ball and began to kick it around. Soon a mini World Cup broke out with scores of opposing soldiers engaging in

pick-up soccer matches. This moment of peace must have seemed surreal, and would be unbelievable if it were not true.

If opposing soldiers could lay down their arms and a spontaneous truce could break out, are there truces that we need to declare? A difficult family member who you have not spoken to or “just tolerate” at family gatherings? Someone who wronged you in the past that you have not forgiven? In our highly partisan political climate could even Republicans and Democrats work together on something?

This is of course a feel good story with a moral, but if we ended the sermon here that’s all it would be and it would not be enough. Because in the Church at Christmas time, we should hear more. We should know more. Because there is something much more serious and deadly than an earthly war that God dealt with. And the truth is that this issue needs more than a truce. It needs a solution. You see, as wonderful as the true story of the Christmas Truce is-it was just that-only a truce. The day after Christmas these same men that shared greetings, songs, and fellowship would begin killing each other again. Millions more would die before World War I would end in November of 1918. Yes, the problem of death needs a solution, not just a truce. And this is exactly why Jesus came. Why we will sing *Silent Night* this evening. Why we can celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ.

Why is there war? Why is there death? You can really trace World War I back to one shot. On June 28, 1914 Archduke Franz Ferdinand of the Hapsburg Empire was killed by an assassin’s bullet. Because of a web of alliances, peace came crashing down and the world was at war. And the existence of sin and everything that comes with it

including death is also the result of one single action. Adam and Eve trusted the devil over God and ate of the forbidden fruit. In this disobedience-the original sin, sin entered the world. Human beings became fallen creatures. In this we see the broken world full of envy, murder, lies, unfaithfulness, and so many other sins. And we cannot do anything to reverse this. And it was not just Adam and Eve. We are all sinners. We cannot simply behave better. We can never be as holy as God and thus be at peace with Him. To fix this, to repair this breach, this separation, God had to act. And He did.

And how He did it is quite amazing. In such a unique manner foreign to how we would do it that if the story were not true, we would say that it could never happen. Truth is stranger, and in this case more glorious, than fiction. Right after the fall into sin, God promised to Adam and Eve a solution-a Savior that would bring eternal peace between God and man would come. Although it took thousands of years, God would not forget His promise. But people would often forget God. The people whom God chose, the Hebrews, from which the Messiah would be born were over and over again shown mercy. They were delivered from slavery. They were preserved in the wilderness. God sent them prophet after prophet to speak to them. And even though they were often unfaithful to God, God remained faithful to them. He continued to love them despite all their sin and rebellion. He would fulfill His promise.

A young woman, a virgin named Mary, would by miracle of God become pregnant-bearing the very Son of God. A man, Joseph, would follow God in faith and lead his family. A journey to Bethlehem for the census. While there it came time for the baby to be delivered, but there

was no room in the inn. This special child was born among humble conditions, laid in a manger-a feeding trough for animals. As unlikely as it would seem, this child-who would be named Jesus-was the long promised Messiah. As we sang tonight, from Heaven above to earth God had indeed come. The prophet Isaiah had predicted 700 years prior, *“The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light”* (9:2) and *“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, the mighty God, The everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace”* (v6) and *“of his government and peace there shall be no end”* (v7).

There was singing that pierced the tension on that Christmas Eve night in 1914 and brought foes together. And fear was replaced by rejoicing on that first Christmas night in the Judean countryside. St. Luke records that an angel of the Lord appeared to shepherds who were watching their flocks by night. Understandably, they were afraid of this heavenly glory that shone about them. But the angel spoke, *“Fear not: for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior which is Christ the Lord.”* (Luke 2:10-11) And then the glorious praise of angelic chorus rang out through the night sky, *“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”* The shepherds would then go and see for themselves the very Prince of Peace that had come on that “Midnight Clear”. They would then depart and spread the Good News of His birth (15-18).

But the birth of the Babe of Bethlehem, as amazing as it was, was not the end. This was no momentary time of mirth and peace. This was

not a temporary truce, but the beginning of the end for sin and its resulting death having a hold on us. Baby Jesus would not stay a baby. He would grow and have a powerful ministry that proclaimed the Kingdom of God by preaching, teaching, and miracles. And in the culmination of His ministry, the hostilities were ended. Jesus would die for the sins of the world: Jew and Gentile, my sins, your sins. As He hung on the cross, nails piercing Him and blood flowing from His wounds He would speak. And the words that emerged from His mouth were not words of a truce. They were not words that pointed to a temporary ceasing of hostilities. They were not words that pointed to a sacrifice that would only forgive sins for a time. No! Jesus before He bowed His head in death on that cross said, *"It is finished!"* The price had been paid. The Prince of Peace had made reconciliation, peace with God was possible. And His resurrection assures us that His victory over death is our victory as well. God had never stopped loving His wayward people. By His grace, through faith we are His children. We have peace through the blood of the cross.

This is why Jesus came. This is why Christians all over the world celebrate His birth on Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and beyond. I pray that you know and have that peace with God. It only comes through knowing the Prince of Peace: Jesus. Christmas brings good tidings, good news. God has come to us, in the flesh, bringing peace and goodwill-just as the angels proclaimed. Your sins are no match for the forgiveness brought through Jesus. God delivers not a temporary truce, but something much better-a permanent solution.

As the sermon closes, I want to leave you with the closing words to each verse of the hymn that we will soon sing that has become a “must have” element of Christmas Eve Services around the world. These are words that those British soldiers heard being sung in 1914 that led to the impromptu Christmas Truce. They are the words which hailed our Savior’s birth, opening the way of salvation. They are words that declare that the Christ child is indeed our Lord and Savior:

Sleep in heavenly peace.

Christ, the Savior, is born!

Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth.

Amen.