

Pass-A-Grille Beach Community Church (UCC)

Christmas in Five Carols
Part 5: I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day
December 24, 2023
by Rev. Dr. Eric Elnes

Scriptures: Isaiah 9:2-6; Luke 2:8-18

I. Of Heaven and Earth

The carol of our focus this morning, “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day,” was first published as the poem, “Christmas Bells,” in 1863 by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a distinguished poet of 19th-century America. Before we delve into this carol about bells, though, it’s worth exploring the significance of bells in religious practices.

Throughout history, bells have resonated within various world religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Christianity, and numerous indigenous folk traditions. In Tibet, the singing bowl, a relative of the bell capable of being struck or played around its rim to emit sound, has been used for generations. Despite the diverse functions and meanings of bells across these faiths, their pervasive and consistent use at the commencement of worship, meditation, or prayer is noteworthy.

The widespread use of bells in spiritual contexts makes a lot of sense to me. For years, I have created meditations with crystal singing bowls, which I strike to produce a sonorous, bell-like gong. [Eric demonstrates.] When struck, a bell awakens something within me. It’s like my soul sits up and pays attention, having heard a sound reminiscent of a “home” not of this world. As the tone fades, I find myself transported from the sensory overload of daily life – with its shopping lists, schedules, and incessant distractions – to a more tranquil and focused state of being. Bells guide me to a place of heightened Reality; a place of inner peace, devoid of anxiety or fear. A place where the veil between the physical realm and the heavenly one is thinner, more transparent.

Do you feel something of this yourself?

The ability of a simple bell to bring heaven and earth together reminds me of the words of Jesus, when he says, “The Kingdom of Heaven is already here. Change your whole way of thinking and believe the good news!”

Have you ever encountered these words before? If not, this could be due to one of the most regrettable mistranslations in the Bible. Following traditional translations, we hear Jesus announcing an approaching Kingdom, not one that is already here: “The Kingdom of Heaven [or God] has drawn near,” is how the line is often rendered. (Matthew 4:17/Mark 1:15)

Then we hear Jesus calling people to “Repent, and believe the good news!” Few people take Jesus’s advice as “good news.” It sounds more like a warning or threat: “Repent! Beat

yourselves up and tell God how bad you are, lest you literally be hell to pay when the God arrives!”

Yet, as we found a couple weeks ago, when Isaiah’s “desert crocus” was mistaken for a “winter rose”, translations of the biblical languages can be problematic. When Jesus says that the realm of Heaven “has drawn near,” it is worth noting that the Greek verb underlying the English is of a form typically used to describe a past event that continues to have present significance. Jesus isn’t saying that the Kingdom of Heaven is coming soon. He’s claiming that this Kingdom has *come already*, which, if true, is definitely significant in the present!

Then there’s that word “repent.” The Greek *metanoia* doesn’t mean to berate or condemn yourself, but to undergo a complete *change of thought*.

So, when we put the whole statement together, we find Jesus’ true message: **“The Kingdom of Heaven is already here. Change your whole way of thinking and believe the good news!”**

I can see why modern translators avoid this more literal translation. Even in ancient times, it would have sounded as if Jesus had been smoking something illegal! I can hear his first-century audience objecting immediately:

“How can you claim that the Kingdom of Heaven is already here? Look around! The Romans continue to oppress us; immorality and injustice prevail. Everywhere there is conflict, warfare, and death. The righteous are humiliated, the faithful are persecuted. No, hell may be here already, but certainly not heaven.”

Curiously, in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus follows his claim of heaven’s presence with the Sermon on the Mount, beginning with his famous “Beatitudes.” Each “blessed be” statement directly counters the objections raised by his audience.

“You are blessed when you are poor in spirit. You’re blessed when you mourn someone’s death. When you’ve been humiliated, know that meekness is a blessing! You say heaven can’t be here because there’s so much unrighteousness, warfare, and persecution of the faithful, but I say to you, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness that is nowhere apparent; blessed are those who make peace amidst conflict; and blessed are you when people revile you, and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you on my account.”

If we take Jesus at his word – that the blessings of heaven are present even within the world’s tragedies – then we must radically shift our perspective about what an experience of heaven even is. We can’t just go looking for heaven in the absence of struggle or conflict, but in the heart of these very things. This is not to deny the existence of heaven in the afterlife. It is only to recognize that we don’t have to wait for it. Heaven is also here and now, and may be experienced at the very times we least expect it.

Nicholas Kristof, a New York Times editorial writer, gives us a clue as to how we may experience heaven at such times. He once shared that, despite visiting some of the world’s

most desperate places, he does not get depressed so much as finds inspiration. When the worst things happen, it tends to bring out the best in people. Not everyone, of course, but so many people respond with selfless, compassionate human acts that it provokes awe and wonder in Kristof. Likewise, when Jesus insists that the Kingdom of Heaven is already here, he is urging us to stop complaining about our struggles and start living them in ways that bring out the best in us, not the worst.

When we discover the inner capacity to respond with our best selves even in our darkest moments, we experience heaven's touch like the chime of a bell. Heaven and earth come together in such a way that we realize our best days need not be behind us, but ahead of us. Our troubles aren't over, but our cowering in the face of trouble certainly is. Our faith doesn't necessarily erase life's challenges; rather, it carves a path through them.

We respond to conflict by becoming peacemakers; to injustice by standing up for what is right; to death by celebrating life; to persecution by turning the other cheek, praying for our enemies, and returning evil with good. Embracing life fearlessly, we learn the essence of truly flourishing amidst chaos.

Have you ever experienced glimpses of heaven that empowered you to respond to whatever hell you were facing with your best self?

II. I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day

Against this background, it's time to turn our attention to our carol.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was born in 1807 in Portland – not my Oregon city, but Portland, Maine. His mother, Zilpah Wadsworth, was the daughter of a Revolutionary War hero, while father, Stephen Longfellow, was a distinguished lawyer in Portland and later served in Congress. With his penning of poems like “Paul Revere’s Ride,” “The Song of Hiawatha,” and “Evangeline,” Henry Longfellow secured his legacy as one of the 19th century’s most esteemed poets.

In 1831, Henry married Mary Storer Potter. Their union, however, was brief and marred by tragedy. While traveling in Europe with Henry in 1835, Mary suffered a miscarriage and became critically ill. She died in Rotterdam, succumbing to complications from the miscarriage.

Upon returning to the United States, Henry’s life was touched by love once more when he met Frances “Fannie” Appleton. After a seven-year courtship, they wed. Unfortunately, this marriage was also doomed to end in sorrow.

On July 9, 1861, a horrific accident occurred. Fannie was at home dressing her daughters’ curls using hot sealing wax. Suddenly, her dress burst into flames and Fannie was quickly engulfed by them. Henry’s desperate efforts to smother the fire were in vain. Fannie succumbed to her injuries the following day, and Henry’s burns were so severe that he was unable to attend her funeral. It’s believed that Henry grew a beard to conceal the burn scars, which became one of his most distinguishing features.

The agony of Fannie's death profoundly affected Henry. He wrote very little poetry for years. A notable exception is his famous poem – "Christmas Bells" – penned in 1863, which evolved into the carol, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day." Sadly, this work was born from further heartache.

On December 1, 1863, while still grieving Fannie's death, Henry received word that his son Charles, who had enrolled in the Union Army without his father's blessing, had been grievously wounded and risked paralysis.

On Christmas Day of 1863, Longfellow, the father of six and twice bereaved, living in a country at war with itself, faced his darkest hour. How could God be present in a world so full of tragedy and conflict? Yet, that Christmas Day, he discovered a Presence much like the writer of Psalm 139 must have experienced when the Psalmist wrote, "*If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,' even the darkness is not dark to you [O God]; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.*" (Ps 139:11-12)

On that fateful Christmas morning, church bells cut through the tumult. In the midst of loss and conflict, Longfellow listened to the bells of hope and experienced heaven and earth coming together. He perceived a Reality where seemingly hopeless situations brim with possibility; where dead ends open wide; where peace and stillness may be found within the world's cacophony. In the heart of his own darkness and that of the world, Henry found the Kingdom of Heaven to be a present reality, not merely a future one. This revelation produced a *metanoia* within him – a complete change of thought – and Henry believed the good news.

What follows is the poem Longfellow wrote in response to that Christmas Day experience – a poem which includes two verses not present in our carol.

"Christmas Bells" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

*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!*

*Till 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!

*Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered 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!*

*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!"*

*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."*

On this Christmas Eve, I invite you to find a humble stable within your heart, where the cries of a young mother in labor echo. Imagine, too, a field where poor shepherds vigilantly guard their flock amidst the piercing chill of the night. Remember that within the heart of their struggles on this very night, they would discover heaven's presence. A faint glimmer would pierce the shroud of darkness, a glimmer that the darkness could not dim; a light that would swell in intensity, so resplendent that the shadows could not quench it. A clarion call of peace and goodwill was sounded, faint at first, unheard by many, until it swelled to resonate like church bells that silenced the roar of cannons.

In the stable of your heart and the field of your imagination, a child yearns to be reborn within you. This child beckons you to transform your entire way of thinking and to embrace the good news that heaven is found not only in the absence of your struggles but also at their core. This child invites you to meet life's challenges with your finest self, experiencing heaven within and extending it to others.