

Christmas Eve 2014      "The Peace to Begin All Peace"

When our dear Ruby Goodnight turned 100 in October, it got me to thinking about the world she was born into. So I looked up what was going on in 1914 and discovered that that was the year the Panama Canal opened, Mother's Day became a national holiday, Charlie Chaplin made his first film and Babe Ruth hit his first home run for the Red Sox. But I knew it was also the year that The Great War broke out in Europe.

H.G. Wells called it the "war to end war." And leaders on both sides thought that the fighting wouldn't last six months. "Our boys will be home for Christmas," the politicians told the people. But it was only in their dreams.

Instead of sitting by a warm fire with their families, British and German soldiers were living in muddy hellholes full of rats, frogs and lice. The conditions in France that first winter of the war made the smelly barn in Bethlehem seem like the Ritz Carlton by comparison.

The fact is that they were stuck in a quagmire, and the boys who had hoped to be going home came to the awful realization that they would be spending Christmas in the trenches. But when the holy day arrived, an amazing thing happened here and there up and down the Western front. In letters home, the soldiers described it.

Sergeant Lightfoot from Staffordshire wrote: "On Christmas Day we saw a sight past imagination. The Germans left their trenches and so did we. We met them halfway and you should have seen them shaking hands, exchanging addresses, and souvenirs, etc. They brought us plenty of cigars and tobacco. There was not a shot fired between us all Christmas Day. One of our men played a melodeon and the Germans danced to it and gave us some very good singing."

[January 4<sup>th</sup>, 1915, *Staffordshire Sentinel*]

A rifleman by the name of Ollis from Surrey County wrote, "What an extraordinary effect Christmas has on the world.

Peace and goodwill amongst men during peace time one can quite understand but peace and goodwill amongst men who have been murdering one another for the past five months is incredible and if I had not seen for myself the effects of Christmas on these two lines of trenches I should never have believed them. All day yesterday the German snipers were busy and unfortunately to some effect.... That is by the way. The point is that when darkness fell all firing ceased. The Germans sang and shouted and cheered, and we sang and cheered. We called Merry Christmas across to one another. [Cryodon Advertiser and Surrey County Reporter]

Sounds like a scene out of a Frank Capra movie, don't you think? But this was no Hollywood mythmaking. This Silent Night really happened. But how? In most trenches, it wasn't the commanding officers who declared the truce. It was the enlisted men, the little guys, the bit players in the story, who

acted more or less like the shepherds in that first Christmas story.

The shepherds heard the good news from the angels and were bound to share it. So they didn't wait to get permission from the owners of the sheep. Straight away they stopped shepherding, abandoned their posts, left their flocks, and went to Bethlehem to greet the baby Jesus. Likewise, the soldiers didn't ask permission from the owners of the war. They stopped shooting, abandoned their weapons, left their trenches and went into No Man's Land to greet the enemy. And when they shook hands, I'm pretty sure Jesus was there.

In that incarnational moment, eternity plunged into history. No Man's Land became God's land, God's kingdom. The unimaginable became imaginable. And in that alternate reality that Christ's birth created, peace became possible.

But time doesn't stand still, not even for miracles. In many places, the British and Germans spent Christmas Day

helping each other bury their dead. Together, they bowed their heads. Solemn prayers were said. The next day the soldiers went back to their trenches, back to their rats and their rifles, back to the war and the wounds.

The fighting was still going on the next Christmas and the next and the next. But the generals made sure that there was no sequel to the Christmas truce of 1914. Thanks to the powers that be, the war that was supposed to end all war ended up starting a century of them. In fact, a lot of the terror in the Middle East today can be traced back to those trenches.

What we have learned since 1914 is that there have always been powers and principalities that want the world to be at war. These powers feed on people who are chained in fear, and they grow stronger with every heart taught to hate. These evil forces don't want us to light candles of peace tonight. They don't want us to call a truce or climb out of our trenches and see the possibility of a different reality. What they want is

for this moment to pass without notice. They want this song to end. They want us to blow out our candles and go back out into the dark night, forgetting all about the light.

Like the soldiers on the Western front, we have a choice between the war that will never end war and the Peace that begins all peace. In other words, we can stay in our trenches and continue to fight wars, big and small, in our world. We can endure the equivalent of rats and frogs and lice in our daily lives. We can wallow waist-deep in the regret, the hurt, the anger, and the grief. Or we can call a truce and let the love of God come down into the trenches of our lives. We can let the peace of Christ silence the guns and stop the wars going on in our own heads and hearts that do nothing but wound the world. We can let the power of the Holy Spirit lift us up out of the trenches, beyond the barbed wire, and into the wide-open freedom of God's land, God's kingdom.

It can even happen tonight as we sing Silent Night. For you don't have to blow out your candle until you have found a place in your heart for the light. And as you go out into that dark, let the peace of God that surpasses all understanding, fill your hearts and your minds with Christ Jesus. Amen.