A.M.D.G. 2nd Sunday in Advent – A Text: Isaiah 11: 1-10

 December 4th, 2016

Isaiah 11: 1-10 … *A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.*

*He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.*

*The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.*

**The Impossible Possibility**

Christmas 2014 commemorated the 100th anniversary of a remarkable event that happened during W.W.1. Known as the Christmas Truce, the story of what happened continues to offer a glimpse of what is possible when enemies are willing to put their differences aside – even for a short time – and hearts are united in a common quest for the Christmas spirit of peace. In a fictional account based on actual letters from soldiers in the trenches, we hear the voices and the story come alive once again:

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| Christmas Day, 1914 |

My dear sister Janet,

It is 2:00 in the morning and most of our men are asleep in their dugouts—yet I could not sleep myself before writing to you of the wonderful events of Christmas Eve. In truth, what happened seems almost like a fairy tale, and if I hadn’t been through it myself, I would scarce believe it. Just imagine: While you and the family sang carols before the fire there in London, I did the same with enemy soldiers here on the battlefields of France!

As I wrote before, there has been little serious fighting of late. The first battles of the war left so many dead that both sides have held back until replacements could come from home. So, we have mostly stayed in our trenches and waited.

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But what a terrible waiting it has been! Knowing that any moment an artillery shell might land and explode beside us in the trench, killing or maiming several men. And in daylight not daring to lift our heads above ground, for fear of a sniper’s bullet.

And the rain—it has fallen almost daily. Of course, it collects right in our trenches, where we must bail it out with pots and pans. And with the rain has come mud—a good foot or more deep. It splatters and cakes everything, and constantly sucks at our boots. One new recruit got his feet stuck in it, and then his hands too when he tried to get out!

Through all this, we couldn’t help feeling curious about the German soldiers across the way. After all, they faced the same dangers we did, and slogged about in the same muck. What’s more, their first trench was only fifty yards from ours. Between us lay No Man’s Land, bordered on both sides by barbed wire—yet they were close enough we sometimes heard their voices.

Of course, we hated them when they killed our friends. But other times, we joked about them and almost felt we had something in common. And now it seems they felt the same.

Just yesterday morning—Christmas Eve Day—we had our first good freeze. Cold as we were, we welcomed it, because at least the mud froze solid. Everything was tinged white with frost, while a bright sun shone over all. Perfect Christmas weather.

During the day, there was little shelling or rifle fire from either side. And as darkness fell on our Christmas Eve, the shooting stopped entirely. Our first complete silence in months! We hoped it might promise a peaceful holiday, but we didn’t count on it. We’d been told the Germans might attack and try to catch us off guard.

I went to the dugout to rest, and lying on my cot, I must have drifted asleep. All at once my friend John was shaking me awake, saying, “Come and see! See what the Germans are doing!” I grabbed my rifle, stumbled out into the trench, and stuck my head cautiously above the sandbags.

I never hope to see a stranger and more lovely sight. Clusters of tiny lights were shining all along the German line, left and right as far as the eye could see.

“What is it?” I asked in bewilderment, and John answered, “Christmas trees!”

And so it was. The Germans had placed Christmas trees in front of their trenches, lit by candle or lantern like beacons of good will.

And then we heard their voices raised in song. *“Stille nacht, heilige nacht . . .”*

This carol may not yet be familiar to us in Britain, but John knew it and translated: *“Silent night, holy night.”* I’ve never heard one lovelier—or more meaningful, in that quiet, clear night, its dark softened by a first-quarter moon.

When the song finished, the men in our trenches applauded. Yes, British soldiers applauding Germans! Then one of our own men started singing, and we all joined in. *“The first Nowell, the angel did say . . .”*

In truth, we sounded not nearly as good as the Germans, with their fine harmonies. But they responded with enthusiastic applause of their own and then began another. *“O Tannenbaum, o Tannenbaum . . .”*

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Then we replied: *“O come all ye faithful . . .”* But this time they joined in, singing the words in Latin: *“Adeste fideles . . .”* British and German harmonizing across No Man’s Land! I would have thought nothing could be more amazing—but what came next was more so.

*“English, come over!”* we heard one of them shout. *“You no shoot, we no shoot.”*

There in the trenches, we looked at each other in bewilderment. Then one of us shouted jokingly, *“You come over here.”* To our astonishment, we saw two figures rise from the trench, climb over their barbed wire, and advance unprotected across No Man’s Land. One of them called, *“Send officer to talk.”*

I saw one of our men lift his rifle to the ready, and no doubt others did the same—but our captain called out, *“Hold your fire.”* Then he climbed out and went to meet the Germans halfway. We heard them talking, and a few minutes later, the captain came back with a German cigar in his mouth!

*“We’ve agreed there will be no shooting before midnight tomorrow,”* he announced. *“But sentries are to remain on duty, and the rest of you, stay alert.”*

Across the way, we could make out groups of two or three men starting out of trenches and coming toward us. Then some of us were climbing out too, and in minutes more, there we were in No Man’s Land, over a hundred soldiers and officers of each side, shaking hands with men we’d been trying to kill just hours earlier!

Before long a bonfire was built, and around it we mingled—British khaki and German grey. I must say, the Germans were the better dressed, with fresh uniforms for the holiday.

Only a couple of our men knew German, but more of the Germans knew English. I asked one of them why that was. *“Because many have worked in England!”* he said. *“Before all this, I was a waiter at the Hotel Cecil. Perhaps I waited on your table!”*

*“Perhaps you did!”* I said, laughing.

Another German had been a porter at Victoria Station. He showed me a picture of his family back in Munich. His eldest sister was so lovely, I told him I should like to meet her someday. He beamed and said he would like that very much and gave me his family’s address.

Even those who could not converse could still exchange gifts—our cigarettes for their cigars, our tea for their coffee, our corned beef for their sausage. Badges and buttons from uniforms changed owners, and one of our lads walked off with the infamous spiked helmet! I myself traded a jackknife for a leather equipment belt—a fine souvenir to show when I get home.

Newspapers too changed hands, and the Germans howled with laughter at ours. They assured us that France was finished and Russia nearly beaten too. We told them that was nonsense, and one of them said, *“Well, you believe your newspapers and we’ll believe ours.”*

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Clearly they are lied to—yet after meeting these men, I wonder how truthful our own newspapers have been. These are not the “savage barbarians” we’ve read so much about. They are men with homes and families, hopes and fears, principles and, yes, love of country. In other words, men like ourselves. Why are we led to believe otherwise?

As it grew late, a few more songs were traded around the fire, and then all joined in for—I am not lying to you*—“Auld Lang Syne.”* Then we parted with promises to meet again tomorrow, and even some talk of a soccer match.

I was just starting back to the trenches when an older German clutched my arm. *“My God,”* he said, *“why cannot we have peace and all go home?”*

I told him gently, *“That you must ask your emperor.”*

He looked at me then, searchingly. *“Perhaps, my friend. But also we must ask our hearts.”*

And so, dear sister, tell me, has there ever been such a Christmas Eve in all history? And what does it all mean, this impossible befriending of enemies?

For the fighting here, of course, it means regrettably little. Decent fellows those soldiers may be, but they follow orders and we do the same. Besides, we are here to stop their army and send it home, and never could we shirk that duty.

Still, one cannot help imagine what would happen if the spirit shown here were caught by the nations of the world. Of course, disputes must always arise. But what if our leaders were to offer well wishes in place of warnings? Songs in place of slurs? Presents in place of reprisals? Would not all war end at once? All nations say they want peace. Yet on this Christmas morning, I wonder if we want it quite enough.

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|  | Your loving brother, Tom |

Unfortunately, the peace was not to last long. By early 1915, it became clear that the interlude of peace was over. The Manchester Guardian, printed on January 7th of that year, wrote: *“They went back into their trenches.”* But for that brief, shining moment in time – what had seemed impossible – became possible. And the power of it has inspired the hearts of many for over 100 years.

With similar words of inspiration our scripture this morning from the 11th chapter of the book of Isaiah gives a glimpse of what is possible at a time when we are desperately seeking signs of peace in a world that is still mad with the drumbeats of war and violence.

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It is unclear whether the text from Isaiah dates from the time of the threat from the Assyrians around 800 BCE or from the Babylonians 2 centuries later. But in any case – with echoes of our own current world situation – the world of Isaiah’s time is in total disarray.

Into this setting – just when things appear hopeless and the future looks bleak – the prophet offers a vision of a time when a king from the great and glorious line of Jesse (of the lineage of David) will rule with wisdom and justice, and with mercy toward the most vulnerable in society. The little ones, the defenseless, the innocent ones will be protected and cared for. And in that great day, peace and justice will reign over all. “*The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”*

These are powerful words for this Advent Season! But as idyllic and utopian as they may seem at first glance – Isaiah, in this vision of peace – invites us not to just sit around and wait for God to do something – but invites us into a partnership with the Sacred to **be** the catalysts for the changes we want to see in the world.

In the Christmas Truce of 1914 – it first took 2 German soldiers who were willing to risk their lives by stepping unarmed into ‘no man’s land’ in a gesture of goodwill and peace. And the path to peace in our own day is still lit one person, one act at a time by each of us who are willing to reach out beyond differences and divides to grasp the hand of another.

This very moment is the right time for us to light a new way to God’s peaceable kingdom – one step, one breath, one gesture at a time. **We** are the Advent change we seek! And apart from us – God cannot work to make the impossible – possible. To fulfill the hope announced by the angels at the birth of Jesus*: “peace on earth, goodwill to all people.”*

The greatest gift any of us can give this Christmas is to embody the peace of God that Jesus came to share. Who needs our understanding – our listening ear? Which relationship needs someone like us to be the first to step into that no-man’s land of misunderstanding and extend the hand of peace? Who are the vulnerable ones in our midst who need a word of care, of love, of affirmation? Where will a friendly gesture, a warm smile, or a kind deed allow the Christmas spirit to be present once again?

To that end, I’d like to offer you an Advent Kindness calendar to inspire you in these days leading up to Christmas – so that person by person, bit by bit we can light the way to a world of peace.

