

“God and Us and Them”

John 14:15-21

Acts 17:22-31

World War I began in the in the summer of 1914 – a war that would be one of the largest and deadliest in history. Rival factions across Europe faced off in a battle of empire and conflicting alliances, trench warfare, artillery fire, and gas attacks.ⁱ That same summer, the pope fell ill and died and a new pope was elected– Pope Benedict XV.ⁱⁱ Benedict reached out to the warring sides, asking them to end this fight. But, if they could not find a way to make peace, he asked, “that the guns may fall silent at least upon the night the angels sang.”ⁱⁱⁱ The new pope begged these many governments – if nothing else, let us practice peace to honor Christ’s birth. The governments declined his request.^{iv}

But that Christmas Eve, something happened from the chilled ground – from amongst the frost and the cold, the constant threat of incoming fire, and the sheer exhaustion of war. Soldiers on the western front started to cautiously peer over the trenches, to wish each other “Happy Christmas,” to talk with one another.^v

Private Albert Moren of the Second Queens regiment described a snowy landscape, illuminated by the moon’s glow. “Graham Williams of the Fifth London Rifle Brigade” said how it all started:

“First the Germans would sing one of their carols and then we would sing one of ours, until when we started up ‘O Come, All Ye Faithful’ the Germans immediately joined in singing the same hymn to the Latin words *Adeste Fideles*. And I thought, well, this is really a most extraordinary thing – two nations both singing the same carol in the middle of a war.”^{vi}

We hear story after story of soldiers from both sides leaving their trenches, sharing food, giving gifts, getting to know one another, even kicking around a makeshift soccer ball. They also took this time of truce to give each other leave to bury their dead. In some places, both sides shared burial services for their lost comrades in arms. For some, this Christmas Truce lasted only for Christmas Eve. In other places, it continued through New Year.^{vii}

In all, about 100,000 British, Belgian, French, and German troops took part in this improvised ceasefire. 100,000 troops was about 2/3 of all those who were deployed!^{viii} We find the story repeated in countless letters home. Said Bruce Bairnsfather, “I wouldn’t have missed that unique and weird Christmas day for anything.” Said Captain Sir Edward Hulse, “It was absolutely astounding, and if I had seen it on a...film I should have sworn that it was faked!”^{ix}

That Christmas Truce didn’t last and the war continued for almost four years after that. But what we find in that moment is two opposing sides, sometimes no more than 100 feet apart.^x On any given day, they overheard their enemy chatting, laughing, pining for their sweethearts. Their enemy wasn’t anonymous to them and by the time they got to their first Christmas at war together, all these soldiers knew was that they wanted the hope and joy and peace of Christmas. Though they were strangers to one another, they were united in Christ and they were drawn together in their desire for a faithful way forward. It wasn’t mutiny; it wasn’t desertion. It was shared silent night, where they stopped to honor the Christ child as they were able.

Following Christ often takes us to unlikely places in improbable situations with seemingly impossible outcomes. Take Paul – his missionary journeys have brought him to Athens. This journey began in Antioch so by the time Paul reached Athens, he had travelled over 2,500 miles by land and by sea.^{xi} Even though he was born in Tarsus, Paul was raised in Jerusalem. Athens was a loong way from home.

Paul had been separated from the Christians who were helping in his missionary work and while he awaited them, he grew distressed at the number of idols around the city of Athens. He started out by preaching and teaching in the synagogue to the Jews and God-fearers there – the people most likely to be like him, to understand his frame of reference, and perhaps to believe. Then he preached in the marketplace to any who would listen, regardless of who they were or where they were from. And it was the Gentile philosophers who seemed the most intrigued by this curious stranger. Some called him, literally, a “seed-picker.” This would be someone who acted like a bird and snatched up loose seed or grain from a field. It was used as an insult for someone who sponges off of others or tries to con people for a living by picking off what scraps they can find. Building on this idea, it meant someone who babbled or whose words were empty.

Other Gentiles thought that he was merely preaching some foreign god, so why not go listen to him? It’s something new and new means exciting or at least entertaining. Why not go and be amused by the curious stranger or perhaps to mock him for his stupid ideas? It is in this setting that Paul begins his speech to the crowds of people from all over – people who are not expecting him to be wise or correct.

But Paul doesn’t meet them as one enemy to another. He doesn’t dig into his trench and decry their woeful, uncorrectable, wrong-headedness. He stands before the Areopagus – literally “Mars Hill,” a public court where legal issues were dealt with and religious questions were debated for all to hear.^{xiii} In the city named for the Greek goddess of wisdom, Paul begins with a compliment. “I see how extremely religious you are in every way.” He toured their town, he learned about their idols and other objects of worship. And then he found a point of connection, “to an unknown god.”

And for Paul, that unknown was enough for him to know that everything that seemed to separate them by class and ethnicity, religion, status, anything else – none of that meant more than the reality that they are all children of God. One God made the heavens and the earth, one God grants life and breath to everything that lives and ever has lived. What's more, we are all one human family and God knows our nations and cultures and identities. But despite all this distance and all these differences, each one searches for God, each one feels around in moments of spiritual darkness to try to find even a trace of the blessing of God's holy presence. Indeed, Paul tells us that peoples far and wide do find God because God is not far from anyone.

Then, Paul quotes their own writers and poets back to the Athenians. We don't know who originally said these words, but they ring so beautiful and so true: "in him we live and move and have our being." This is not "we" individually or "we" as a single nation – this "we" is all of us, all of humanity. If we are alive, we are alive in God. Because this is so, we are all called back to God, to repent and reunite in countless communities of grace. Paul left the trenches of the supposedly safe and journeyed into the no-man's-land of the supposed enemy. Because of this, some scoffed, but some believed – without anger or blame, without insulting or belittling. Paul spoke to them as beloved children of God and so some of them realized that they really were beloved children of God.

In our Gospel reading, we find ourselves with Jesus and the disciples just after the Last Supper. In that small, dark room, lit by oil lamps, we can hear the earnest intensity in Jesus's voice. We can see the disciples, reclining slightly, with full, happy bellies – probably a rare experience as they followed Jesus from town to town to preach the good news. Perhaps their eyes were even a bit bright from celebrating the holiday, though clouded from the magnitude of what was taking place and what was to come.

I don't know if you noticed, but Jesus keeps repeating himself, "just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." "Those who love me will keep my word." On that fateful night, Jesus wanted them to know that he would be with them. And when he seemed to them to be lost forever, still he would be with them – in a new way, through the Advocate, the Holy Spirit that abides in them forever more.

Jesus tells them, "I will not leave you orphaned." I will not leave you in grief. You will not be inconsolable as someone for whom there is no hope. Look and see – I am sending you the Holy Spirit. Watch for it, feel it surrounding you. And more – I am coming to you even though you don't see me. I am coming back. Keep following my commandments; keep loving me; keep growing as a community that blows away the expectations and the norms of the rest of the world.

The closer we come to Christ, the closer we grow to one another. The more faithfully we follow the commandments, the more remarkable our service and mission in the world. The more we worship, the more we transform ourselves and one another, reflecting the image of God and the example of Christ within us. Why should we let the world denounce and divide us? Why should we disbelieve that a way of peace is possible?

As followers of Christ, we must ask ourselves: who is our enemy? Who is us and who is them? Have we created enemies by feeding into fear, anger, and hatred? Have we convinced ourselves that we are entitled to a certain level of meanness or cynicism? Are we trying to fix the world by blaming others instead of holding ourselves accountable?

Our true place of rest, our true safe haven is in Christ and not in ourselves no matter what happens. We must seek to release our fear into the stillness of Christ. We must seek to offer up our anger to the joy of new life together. We must seek to untie the knots of our hatred so that we can reawaken to awe and wonder. So we come near to the heart of God; so we come nearer to

every miraculous, unfinished, blessed soul we encounter. May God give us the courage to dare to become who God calls us to be. Amen.

ⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_I

ⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope_Benedict_XV

ⁱⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas_truce

^{iv} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas_truce

^v https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas_truce

^{vi} <https://time.com/3643889/christmas-truce-1914/>

^{vii} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas_truce

^{viii} <https://time.com/3643889/christmas-truce-1914/>

^{ix} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas_truce; <https://time.com/3643889/christmas-truce-1914/>

^x <https://time.com/3643889/christmas-truce-1914/>

^{xi} <https://bethanygu.edu/news/missionary-journey/>

^{xii} <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Areopagus>