



Finding JOY in Advent!

A Hymn of Advent Joy, even in the presence of pain...

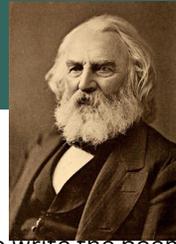
On Christmas Day 1863, **Henry Wadsworth Longfellow** was inspired to write the poem “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day”. He lived during a challenging time; the Civil War was raging, while new ideas in biology, philosophy, and psychology from 1800's Europe were challenging Christian beliefs across Western culture:

- German philosopher **Friedrich Nietzsche** had written his declaration, “God is dead, and we have killed him”, expressing his belief that the notion of Christendom, or the unity of believers across cultural lines, was impossible in modern society. Nietzsche was an atheist and believed that the Christian idea of God was outdated. Humanity should rely on personal willpower as the source to create morality, values, and to make sense of the world. Advancements in philosophy and science were the way human beings had “killed” off the myth of God, as He was no longer needed.
- British botanist **Charles Darwin** published “On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection Alone”, positing that the origin of all created things, humankind included, could be understood purely by scientific means, without any need for a Creator God. Natural selection (“survival of the fittest”) became prominent.
- The discipline of psychology developed by **Sigmund Freud**, who argued that all human frailties and problems could be traced to faulty subconscious thoughts, undermining any notion of human sinfulness or the need for a divine Savior, to rescue humanity from sin’s impact. Good mental health was all that was needed.
- Longfellow also experienced personal tragedies - In 1861, his wife Frances died in a tragic accident while sealing envelopes with hot wax as her clothes caught fire.
- In 1863, he suffered another blow. The poet was a staunch abolitionist and greatly troubled by the Civil War. In March of 1863, his son Charley decided, against his father’s wishes, to enlist in the 1st Massachusetts Artillery. In November, Charley’s unit engaged in a battle in Virginia and he was shot, the bullet passing through his back and shoulder, nicking his spine. Longfellow traveled to Washington to bring his son home from the hospital on December 8, facing a months-long process of nursing his son back to health.
- In these trying experiences, it would be understandable for Longfellow to struggle with any sense of joy on Christmas Day, 1863, but here is what he wrote:

“I Heard The Bells on Christmas Day“ 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!”

- How does Longfellow’s poem still speak to the society we live in today? Our world is the product of over 100 years of the humanist ideas from his time being taught as truth, yet we still face war, racism, injustice, and hatred.
- **Discuss** - in this poem, what is a Christian response to the issues in 1863 and 2023? How do we experience and share joy in this season?



Spiritual Health in Practice

Do you know of anyone facing a particularly difficult time in this season, much like the circumstances Longfellow was facing? How can your group reach out with joy to those who need to know that “God is not dead, nor doth He sleep” in this Advent season?

Advent Prayers

Pray for one another - are there ways that you relate to the griefs and challenges that Longfellow was facing? How can the group pray for you? Pray that God can renew our joy in Christ in this season!

