

Christmas 1914

Preached at Edgewood UMC, Fargo ND

Luke 2:8-20

New Year's Day, 2012

Rev. Dr. Anne Dilenschneider

Although World War I was one of the most horrific wars in history,
causing nearly 40 million casualties and 20 million military and civilian deaths,
it also included a famous spontaneous event
known as the Christmas Truce of 1914.

There have been many truces like this over the centuries,
but the Christmas Truce of 1914 is the most famous.

20 years ago, I learned the story of that Christmas Truce
from my friend John McCutcheon
when I was producing a concert for him (I've produced 5 with him).

As John tells it,
he had heard the story from an elderly African-American woman janitor in 1984.
She had accidentally surprised him backstage,
thinking the room was empty,
when he was preparing to go on-stage
for a concert in Birmingham, Alabama.
There was still plenty of time before the concert
when she had finished cleaning the room,
so John and the woman began to swap stories.
Then, two minutes before he had to go on stage,
she told him the story that changed his life.
And during the intermission that night,
the story quickly became a song.
And that song has been the source of some of the most amazing events in his life.

Once, when John was playing at a concert festival in Denmark,
3 elderly gentlemen kept showing up every time he played.
They would stand in the aisle, watch him, and then leave at intermission.
After several days of this, John decided to ask them who they were.
They told him they were from Germany
and they had come to Denmark "because of that song."
"What song?" John asked.
"The one about the Christmas in the trenches," they replied.
"We were there.
And ever since, people have told us that we were crazy,
that it couldn't have happened.
But it did happen, and we were there.
So we had to come hear the song."

I want to share that song with you today, but first, here's some context:

During WWI,

France, Russia and Britain fought the Austro-Hungarian, German and Ottoman Empires.

Much of the war was spent in the brutal stalemate of trench warfare.

The 475 mile-long Western Front extended from the North Sea to the Swiss frontier.

It was marked with trenches 7 feet deep and 6 feet wide, topped by sandbags.

The trenches of both sides were often only 30-70 yards apart,

much closer together than the length of an American football field.

Looking from their trenches,

the soldiers could see the barbed wire entanglements

that criss-crossed that no-man's land,

and the unburied bodies of their fallen comrades

who were impaled on that wire.

The soldiers often stood for days in water that was waist-deep in the trenches.

The weight of their greatcoats was doubled by the wet clay and water.

Their feet rotted in their boots,

and lice were constantly biting them.

Many of the soldiers developed nephritis

and many had "shell shock" (what we now call PTSD).

Rats roamed freely amid the decaying food scraps and bodies.

WWI veteran Henry Williamson described how a hard frost set in just before Christmas 1914.

He got up one night because his frozen feet began to hurt

and he made a fire and some coffee.

"My eyes smarted with smoke, there was no flame unless I fanned all the time.

My arms were heavy in the frozen greatcoat sleeves,

mud-slabbed and hard as drainpipes;

while the skirts of the coat were like boards.

I went back to sleep, but pain kept me awake;

so I crawled out again and was once more in frozen air,

bullets smacking through trees glistening with frost.

I was thirsty, but the water-bottle was solid."

On Christmas Eve, he said,

"Having received gift packages from home,

the men of both sides were in a festive mood.

That evening, along the front line,

German troops sang Christmas carols.

Many erected candle-lit Christmas trees on their parapets

and called out season greetings to their enemies opposite them."

On his side, he said, "many troops responded with applause,

holiday wishes and songs of their own."

Then, Henry said,

"an amazing series of events occurred.

Along parts of the British, French and Belgian lines,

men from both sides went out into No Man's Land unarmed

to meet, shake hands, and fraternize.

The First Battalion Royal Irish Rifles reported Germans calling out:

"If you Englishmen come out and talk to us, we won't fire."

Scotsmen in Flanders, the 2nd Queen's Battalion near La Chapelle d' Armentieres,

and the 2nd Battalion Royal Welsh Fusiliers also reported

Germans singing “Stille Nacht” (“Silent Night”)
and extending invitations to meet in No Man’s Land.”

The next morning, on Christmas Day,
men from both sides gathered in No Man’s Land.

Both sides helped each other bury their dead
and they had joint memorial services.

Members of the Sixth Battalion of the Gordon Highlanders described it this way:

“About four o'clock that afternoon took place
what must remain one of the most memorable Christmas services
of all time.

On one side of the dividing ditch were British officers,
with soldiers in rank behind them;
on the other, German officers with men of their regiments about them. . . .

At the close,
the Chaplain stepped forward and saluted the German Commander,
who shook hands with him and bade him farewell.

It was an impressive sight -- officers and men,
bitter enemies as they were,
uncovered, reverent,
and for the moment united in offering to their dead
the last offices of homage and honour.”

British Army Private Frederick W. Heath

described what happened next in a letter he sent home on January 9, 1915:

“Here was no desire to kill,
but just the wish of a few simple soldiers (and no one is quite so simple as a soldier)
that on Christmas Day, at any rate, the force of fire should cease.

We gave each other cigarettes and exchanged all manner of things.

We wrote our names and addresses on the field service postcards,
and exchanged them for German ones.

We cut the buttons off our coats and took in exchange the Imperial Arms of Germany.

“But the gift of gifts was Christmas pudding.

The sight of it made the Germans’ eyes grow wide with hungry wonder,
and at the first bite of it they were our friends for ever.

Given a sufficient quantity of Christmas puddings,
every German in the trenches before ours would have surrendered!”

According to the Gordon Highlanders,

The men traded beef and jam for sausage and chocolate,
and British rum was traded for wine or cognac.

Strangest of all, they said,

was the moment “when it was discovered
that there were barbers among the enemy”

Many of the British were shaved by the Germans in No Man’s Land!

Then, because No Man’s Land had been cleared of bodies,
men from both sides played soccer.

In many places, the men ate Christmas dinner together
and “entertained each other with singing and instrumental music.”

The Germans wrote letters home that said,
“The way we spent Christmas in the trenches sounds almost like a fairy tale.”
and
“It was a Christmas celebration in keeping with the command ‘Peace on earth’
and a memory which will stay with us always.”
and
“Probably the most extraordinary event of the whole year, ‘a soldier's truce’
without any higher sanction by officers or generals.”

Along the front, the truce lasted anywhere from 6 to 10 days.

The men would warn each other whenever they saw a commander approaching.
According to one account:
“On [the commanders’] approach the “truce” seemed to vanish,
and trench routine was normal.
A few rounds were fired into the air,
lest by accident a front-line combatant might come by harm.
As soon as the [commanders] left the line, the truce revived,
and friend and foe again swarmed into No Man’s Land.” (Highlanders)

Many hoped the truce would end until New Year’s Day or later,
“but the high commands sternly objected”
and threatened the soldiers on both sides
with being court-martialed for committing high treason.

Speaking in the House of Commons in 1930,
Sir H. Kingsley Wood,
who had been a major at the front in 1914 said,
“If we had been left to ourselves
there would never have been another shot fired.
It was only the fact that we were being controlled by others
that made it necessary
for us to start trying to shoot one another again.”

Henry Williamson described the ending of the truce where he was:
“The truce lasted, in our part of the line for several days.
On the last day of 1914, one evening, a message came over No Man’s Land,
carried by a very polite Saxon corporal.
[The message] was that their regimental . . . staff officers
were going round their line at midnight;
and they would have to fire their automatische pistolen,
but would aim high, well above our heads.
Would we, even so, please keep under cover, ‘lest regrettable accidents occur.

“And at 11 o'clock -- for they were using Berlin time –

we saw the flash of several Spandau machine guns
passing well above No Man's Land.

“I had taken the addresses of two German soldiers,
promising to write to them after the war.
And I had, vaguely, a childlike idea that if all those in Germany
could know what the soldiers had to suffer,
and that both sides believed the same things
about the righteousness of the two national causes,
it might spread, this truce of Christ on the battlefield,
to the minds of all,
and give understanding
where now there was scorn and hatred.”

Just four months ago, John McCutcheon told a story
about his visit to play a series of concerts in Winchester, Virginia.
One morning, between concerts, a preacher from that town
took John all the way to West Virginia to meet someone,
but all the way there,
he wouldn't tell John who they were going to see.
Well, that “someone” turned out to be Frank Buckles,
the last surviving soldier of WWI.
Frank died last February at the age 110.
That day, Frank wanted John to sing “that song” for him.
Frank told John that he made two mistakes in the song.
One was there was no gas in 1914, that came in 1915.
But then Frank told John,
“the biggest mistake you make
is that you make it sound like it only happened once.”

PLAY “Christmas in the Trenches”

Sources:

“Christmas in the Trenches” book and song by John McCutcheon
Joyeux Noël (2005) a film from France
“The Christmas Truce” by Henry Williamson <http://www.worldwar1.com/temp/truce.txt>
<http://www.christmastruce.co.uk/heath.html>
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<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EghujaSynnM>
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<http://www.firstworldwar.com/features/christmastruce.htm>

Christmas in the Trenches

by John McCutcheon, 1984

My name is Francis Tolliver, I come from Liverpool,
Two years ago the war was waiting for me after school.
To Belgium and to Flanders to Germany to here
I fought for king and country I love dear.
'Twas Christmas in the trenches where the frost so bitter hung,
The frozen fields of France were still, no Christmas song was sung.
Our families back in England were toasting us that day,
Their brave and glorious lads so far away.

I was lying with my messmates on the cold and rocky ground
When across the lines of battle came a most peculiar sound.
Says I, "Now listen up, me boys!" Each soldier strained to hear
As one young German voice sang out so clear.
"He's singing bloody well, you know," my partner says to me.
Soon one by one each German voice joined in in harmony.
The cannons rested silent, the gas clouds rolled no more,
As Christmas brought us respite from the war.

As soon as they were finished and a reverent pause was spent,
"God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen" struck up some lads from Kent.
The next they sang was "Stille Nacht," "'Tis 'Silent Night,'" says I.
And in two tongues one song filled up that sky.
"There's someone coming towards us!" the front line sentry cried.
All sights were fixed on one lone figure trudging from their side.
His truce flag, like a Christmas star, shone on that plain so bright
As he bravely strode unarmed into the night.

Soon one by one on either side walked into No Man's land
With neither gun nor bayonet we met there hand to hand.
We shared some secret brandy and we wished each other well
And in a flare-lit soccer game we gave 'em hell.
We traded chocolates, cigarettes, and photographs from home
These sons and fathers far away from families of their own.
Young Sanders played his squeeze-box and they had a violin,
This curious and unlikely band of men.

Soon daylight stole upon us and France was France once more.
With sad farewells we each began to settle back to war.
But the question haunted every heart that lived that wondrous night,
"Whose family have I fixed within my sights?"
'Twas Christmas in the trenches, where the frost so bitter hung
The frozen fields of France were warmed as songs of peace were sung.
For the walls they'd kept between us to exact the work of war
Had been crumbled and were gone forevermore.

My name is Francis Tolliver, in Liverpool, I dwell.
Each Christmas come since World War I, I've learned its lessons well:
That the ones who call the shots won't be among the dead and lame,
And on each end of the rifle, we're the same.

Friday, January 8, 1915.

The Daily Mirror

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AN HISTORIC GROUP: BRITISH AND GERMAN SOLDIERS PHOTOGRAPHED TOGETHER.



Foes became friends on Christmas Day, when the British and Germans arranged an unofficial truce. The men left the trenches to exchange cigars and cigarettes, and were even photographed together. This is the historic picture, and shows the soldiers of the opposing Armies standing side by side.



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