

I Heard the Bells

by Dr. Marsha Boyd-Mitchell

Unsplash Hamza Bounaim

“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful” (Colossians 3:15, NIV).

“I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day” is a familiar Christmas carol made from the words of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem, “Christmas Bells,” which he wrote on December 25, 1863, during the American Civil War. The country was at odds with itself, and Longfellow writes this in the middle of the war when he was experiencing a lot of personal pain.

One of the most popular versions of the carol was sung by Bing Crosby in 1956 and it has been a Christmas favourite for many of us. In 2008, the contemporary Christian rock band, Casting Crowns, recorded a version with music that resonated with people because it may have better reflected the tone of the lyrics. If you’ve not heard it, look it up on YouTube.

The lyrics are soulful, deep, and full of meaning, alternating between the traditional words and the band’s new

lyrics that speak back to the carol. Like the tolling of a bell, like a choir’s song, the words powerfully call each person’s heart toward “peace on earth, good-will to men.”

Longfellow’s poem reads this way:

*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.”*

Peace is something to strive for this Christmas 2022. We live in a world that is dealing with the residual fallout of the last two and a half years. Many headlines in our newspapers cover stories on recession, addiction,

mental health decline, burnout, supply chain problems, and worker shortages. These are a few of the headlines that replaced the COVID numbers and health updates.

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem so many years ago, there was talk of political strife, religious oppression, and the need for a deliverer (a Saviour). The Jewish people waited for their Messiah. The prophet Isaiah revealed: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (9:6, NIV). God’s chosen people were waiting for peace, that the Messiah would bring peace in this life and the next.

Longfellow’s lyrics revealed conflict between people who were supposed to belong to the same country. “For hate is strong and mocks the song”—hate threatened to overshadow peace. However, the refrain becomes more hopeful, more steadfast with, “The Wrong shall fail, the Right prevail, With peace on earth, good-will to men!” And Casting Crowns prompts us to listen for the Christmas bells: “Does anybody hear them?” In the midst of the suffering the bells ring out and remind us of the peace offered by the Prince of Peace.

We have the opportunity this Christmas 2022 to ring the bells of peace for the young people in our lives. We will lead by our strong example. No matter what is looming—God is not dead nor does he sleep! Our steadfastness will go a long way in helping the next generation know the peace of Christ—in fact, it is the best gift we can give them. Let’s trust him this season, the way Mary and Joseph did that first Christmas.



by Dr. Marsha Boyd-Mitchell
Marsha Boyd-Mitchell is the executive director of Christian Action Federation of NB Inc. and the principal of Sussex Christian School.