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No matter how jaded we become, few completely forsake the hope of God's dreams descending at Christmas. No matter how hardened we grow about the cruel facts of life versus, say, the charmed brush of miracles, we never stop aching for God's mysterious goodness to bless our broken earth in enchanted ways.

Have you ever had a wondrous dream come true? Then as you returned to life's harsh routines, you wondered if it ever really happened? Today I share a tale of when charm blessed a ruined earth at a most dismal moment; when lofty dreams overcame sordid instincts. After it was over even those who witnessed it wondered how it ever could have come to be. All of this transpired one silent, holy Christmas Eve, 103 years ago last Sunday. Some of you already know this story.

By Christmas Eve, 1914 the Great War, as it was called, was but five months old. Already over a million men had perished. In this mindless war the two sides literally dug down into opposing trenches—as close as 50 paces—and waited for the other side to attack. Seldom did the attacks yield much more than massive casualties dotting the No Man's Land in between. These trenches snaked hundreds of miles through Belgium and France and then back east toward Germany.

Life within the trenches was unimaginably miserable. The bland military rations could barely be kept from rats co-occupying the vast ditches. Constant rain made earthen walls collapse. Imagine standing all day in mud up to your knees, never mind sleeping. These battle lines seemed a scorched nightmare of an alien landscape utterly inhospitable to life. No safe, dry, or comfortable place was to be found. The only relief came as everything froze and as the quagmire solidified.

Of course, all war is horrible but this was particularly hellish. Most of the time was standing and waiting in the trenches with little real fighting apart from sporadic exchanges of fire. Then orders would come for a raid. And massive loss of life would result. Months could pass by without any appreciable change in positions. It was shot through with futility as corpses from both sides piled in the No Man's Land where no one dared venture to bury the bodies. One wounded Punjabi who fought along with the British, Belgians and French wrote to relatives in India, “Do not think this is a war. It is not a war. It is no less than the end of the world.”

But as Christmas Eve blessedly came, something changed. The barest of civilities emerged. After some Germans sang a British favorite in perfect English, the 2nd Bedfordshires cheered and shouted for an encore. A German called warily into the Christmas Eve darkness, “I am a lieutenant! Gentlemen, my life is in your hands, for I am out of my trench and walking towards you. Will one of your officers come out and meet me halfway?” The British suspected trickery, but finally an officer named Waddy broke through his own barbed wire and went out. When the Germans saw this they sang louder as enemies met in No Man's Land.

Music did much to melt the enmities. Voices reached across the void of No Man's Land. A rich baritone echoed from a German parapet, "Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht." "It was so strange," wrote a soldier, "like being in another world to which we had come through a nightmare; a world finer than the one left behind, except for the beautiful things like music or springtime upon my bicycle in the country."

A truce emerged up and down that long front. The Germans would sing beloved carols and the British would answer with bawdy, sometimes mocking, pub songs. The Germans persisted with more carols and the British came around to sing their own. The German "Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht" would find its response in our English version "Silent Night, Holy Night," answering across that same space. Think of that, Christmas carols stopping a war. Amazing! For the first time in the bloody months the rat-a-tat-tat of machine guns paused and the night was silent.

Many miles away Captain R. J. Armes of the North Staffordshires ventured out to meet his German counterpart in the middle. "We agreed to have no shooting until 12 midnight tomorrow. We talked together; ten or more Germans gathered round. I was almost at their lines, within a yard or so. Then we wished one another good night and a good night's rest, and a happy Christmas and parted with a salute. I got back to our trench. (Men from both sides exchanged songs.) It was a curious scene, a lovely moonlit night, the German trenches with small lights on them...It is weird to think that tomorrow night we shall be hard at it again. If one gets through this show it will be a Christmas to live in one's memory."

Understand how special a place Christmas held in the hearts of the Germans. Their army had arranged to have *tannenbaums*, their Christmas trees, delivered up to the front lines. So when night fell on Christmas Eve, one saw lit Christmas trees all up and down the front, atop the parapets, edging the trenches. Under normal circumstances, that would be very dangerous thing to do. But the British, French, and Belgians could not bring themselves to fire on such a reverent sight.

Elsewhere, on Christmas Day, as the sides eased into No Man's Land, a rabbit darted out. All formalities of saluting and explaining disappeared as the Scotsmen and Germans clambered after it. Friendships ensued. A Scottish chaplain offered a cigar to the Germans. Then he gave them a soldier's prayer that he kept in his cap: "Shield us, in danger's hour...Hear my prayer for my Comrades in this great war, incline their hearts to think of thee." The German lieutenant responded, "I will value this because I believe what it says, and when the war is over I shall take it out and give it as a keepsake to my youngest child."

Much was exchanged between the would-be enemies. Helmets, elaborate buttons, photographs, belt buckles, you name it. The Germans rolled barrels of beer into the gap between and the British answered with tins of plum pudding. The Germans offered their sauerkraut and the British responded with chocolate cake.

Their common love of football (our soccer) led to fields marked out with helmets and small sacks of sawdust substituting for balls, where none could be located. Neither side protested penalties that would likely be loudly disputed in peacetime.

This truce also allowed the warriors to bury their dead. But they did not bury only the comrades who had fallen from their side. No, together they buried fallen friends *from both sides*. More than this, Chaplain Adams conducted a joint burial service for the dead unmarked by divisions of nation or army. "It was most wonderful," Private Burns wrote, "Yes, I think it was a sight one will never see again."

This truce was never official. Generals on both sides held that the war was very much on. But doughboys at the front lines responded from a different place. Most of the officers alongside the fighting men fully participated in this impulsive truce.

One German corporal whom they called "Adi" heard about these troops crossing the *Niemandsland*, to exchange Christmas with the British. The corporal was outraged. "Such a thing shouldn't occur in wartime," he wrote. Is there no sense of honor left at all?" Adi was back a bit from the front lines. Although a baptized Catholic, Adi rejected every vestige of religious observance while his unit marked Christmas in the cellar of a French monastery. Another German Corporal named Frobenius, a Lutheran seminarian, read the Christmas Gospel to a joint congregation of Catholics and Protestants in that monastery basement. But Adi, known as Corporal Hitler, would tolerate nothing of what emerged all around him.

Of course, the truce was not perfect. Some soldiers did reconnaissance on the fortifications of the enemy. Others bolstered their defenses of barbed wire, itself a defensive weapon. There were occasional misunderstanding shots fired. But, amazingly, the violence did not spread. And this Christmas truce essentially held.

Have you ever had a wondrous dream come true? And then afterward you could only wonder whether it really happened as you returned to life's severe routines? The truce ended as it started, from the ranks of men in the trenches. But this only after defying orders for several days or in some cases longer. When ordered again to fire on the enemy, many simply fired into the sky. New troops had to be brought to the front because many of the truce troops were no longer considered reliable. Of course, this means that they could no longer be counted upon to kill. In retrospect, the truce seems like a dream. Especially when we consider that six thousand men per day would die over the next five years, a total of 15 million.

Here we are at Christmas, 2017. I shudder to ponder North Korea and other conflagrations only a spark away. Of course, I felt similarly about South Africa's racial hatred exploding into war in the 1980s, and I was blessedly proven wrong. As great a story as this WWI truce is, it's an even better parable. At high holy days we do well to recall that even as skirmishes rage here below, God has already won the war against evil and death in Jesus' resurrection. We are to bring peace to white hot trenches, raging as though God has never struck a victorious peace.

That always takes a lot of faith, courage, imagination, stubbornness, and prayer. But in 2018 we all resolve to do our part to quell hateful violence whatever ways we can, with whatever miracles are at our disposal to us, in any given moment. Amen.