

Longfellow's Christmas Peace I Heard the Bells

In 1861, our country was engulfed in a terrible civil war. The land saw a near constant stream of carnage and horror as canons roared, guns blasted and men fell. Peace seemed an unattainable, far distant hope. Few families were left untouched. The family of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the great American poet, was no exception. In that same year, a tragic accident took the life of his beloved sweetheart and wife, Fannie. One summer morning, a few drops of molten wax and a morning breeze caused her dress to catch fire. Longfellow tried to extinguish the flames by wrapping his arms around her, but he could not save her and she lived only 'til morning. He, too, was severely injured, both in body and in soul.

The light went out of his life, and darkness settled into his heart. That first Christmas, he wrote in his journal, "How inexpressibly sad are all holidays."

A year passed, but the deep sorrow remained. Another December entry reads, "I can make no record of these days. Better leave them wrapped in silence. Perhaps someday God will give me peace."

Yes, peace. A deep yearning for peace. But where was it? In a world filled with chaos and calamity, where was the promised peace of which the angels sang? Even today war fills the earth. Conflict and contention seem to surround us; in our cities, in our homes and in our very lives. Like Longfellow, we may wonder, where is peace? In his journal entry of December 25, 1862, he wrote, "A merry Christmas' say the children, but that is no more for me."

In 1863, Longfellow's oldest son left the family home, without his father's blessing, to join the war, explaining in a letter, "I feel it to be my first duty to do what I can for my country...I would willingly lay down my life for it, if it would be of any good." His life would not be required, but shortly before Christmas, word came that he had been severely wounded in battle, crippling his young body.

There is no journal entry for Christmas of that year.

But Longfellow's plea for peace was not to remain unanswered. In 1864, even though the war still raged, hope gradually returned—to the country and to his heart. God heard and answered the questions of his soul. His search for peace was successful. On December 25, 1864, he wrote the words which would become the immortal Christmas carol, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day."

In his poem, Longfellow's bells ring out with sweet, familiar carols which are soon overshadowed by his foreboding thoughts of death and hate. But the bells answer back, ringing in the eternal truths that God is not dead; that good will triumph and that peace will prevail.