

I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day

"He who has not Christmas in his heart will never find it under a tree." Roy L. Smith

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" Luke 2:14

One of America's best known poets, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) contributed to the host of Christmas carols sung each Christmas season when he wrote the poem "Christmas Bells" on December 25, 1864. The original poem had seven stanzas but in 1872 John Baptiste Calkin took out two stanzas referencing the American Civil War and gave us the memorable Christmas carol we know today as "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day."

Longfellow crafted this poem some months before Lee's surrender to Grant at Appomattox Court House on April 9, 1865. Within the poem, however, he captures the years of despair from the horrors of the American Civil War and, beyond that, to a future that was filled with hope.

The depth and breadth of these words can only also be understood within the context of Longfellow's own life. On July 13, 1843 Henry married Frances. They settled down in the historic Craigie House overlooking the Charles River in Cambridge, MA where they soon had five children.

1861 was a year of personal and national tragedy for Longfellow and his family. On April 12, 1861 the opening shots of the American Civil War were fired and on July 10 Fanny Longfellow was fatally burned in an accident in the library of Craigie House.

After trimming some of their seven year old Edith's curls, Fanny decided to preserve the clippings in sealing wax. Melting a bar of sealing wax with a candle, a few drops fell unnoticed upon her dress. But when a gust of wind came through an open window, the hot wax ignited the light material of her dress--completely wrapping her in flames. To protect her children, she ran into Henry's study and together they tried frantically to put out the flames.

He tried to extinguish the flames with a small rug, but when that failed, he threw his arms around Fanny to smother the flames, causing him to sustain serious burns on his face, arms, and hands. The next morning, Fanny died. Too ill from his burns and grief, Henry did not attend her funeral. Later, he grew his trademark full beard because he was no longer able to shave properly due to the burns and scarring.

The first Christmas after Fanny's death, Longfellow wrote, "How inexpressibly sad are all holidays." Soon after, he wrote, "I can make no record of these days. Better leave them wrapped in silence. Perhaps someday God will give me peace."

In 1862, the Civil War escalated and the death toll from the war began to mount. Longfellow's journal entry for December 1862 reads, "'A merry Christmas' say the children, but that is no more for me."

In 1863, Longfellow's son, Charles, ran away at the age of 17 to join the Union Army. He wrote his father, "I have tried hard to resist the temptation of going without your leave, but I cannot any longer...I feel it to be my first duty to do what I can for my country and I would willingly lay down my life for it if it would be of any good."

That Fall, Longfellow received word that his son was severely wounded with a bullet passing under his shoulder blades and severely injuring his spine. He brought his son home in December. The Christmas of 1863 was silent in his journal.

Days looked dark, and he probably asked himself the question, "How can I write about peace on earth, goodwill to men in this war-torn country, where brother fights against brother and father against son?" But then, on December 25, 1864, he wrote the words of this poem and brought us this timeless message.

Excerpts taken from:

"I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" by Dr. Don Meyer, The Phoenix

"I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" by Greg Laurie, Christian Post

"The Civil War: beauty from tragedy, 'I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day'" Martha M. Boltz, Washington Post