

**Ring the Bells**  
*Christmas Eve 2018*  
Pastor Bryan Clark

**And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.**

**That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."**

**Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying,**

**"Glory to God in highest heaven,  
and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased."**

**When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."**

**They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished, but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.**

(\*NLT, Luke 2:6-20)

A few weeks ago, a few of us gathered together and put together a string ensemble and played at the City Mission – we played Christmas music. We've done that actually for several years and I think for those of us that do it in the midst of the commercialism and busyness of Christmas, it's just a reminder of what Christmas is really all about. Doesn't matter who you are. Doesn't matter what you've done. Doesn't matter what's been done to you. Really doesn't matter where you find yourself this day in life. There's hope. God sent His Son to be the Savior of the world. God offers forgiveness of sin. He offers new life in Christ. And He offers hope of a life to come what's beyond what we can imagine and He offers it as a gift to anyone who chooses to receive it. It's good to remind ourselves this Christmas Eve that God didn't send His Son into the world because all was well with the world. He sent His son into the world because the world is broken. It's all messed up. And we feel that deeply today. I don't know what your story is but I'm confident there's a lot of pain in this room today. Maybe you've lost someone you deeply love and Christmas stirs up those feelings again. Maybe for some of you it's a disease that just won't go away. Maybe it's an addiction that holds you in bondage. Maybe it's the breakdown of a relationship. Maybe it's just the death of a dream, and you start to realize that life isn't going to be what you thought it was going to be.

In the midst of all of that, it's good to remind ourselves there's still hope. God sent His Son to be the Savior of the world. No matter who you are, no matter what's your story, no matter what's going on this Christmas Eve, God offers the forgiveness of sin. He offers new life in Christ. He offers the hope of a world to come that's beyond anything you could imagine. And He offers it freely as a gift. Sometimes the most courageous thing we can do at Christmas is to just dig down deep and remember again what we know to be true.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow is considered by many to be the greatest American poet of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote the lyrics to a beloved Christmas song, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day," but he wrote those words out of great pain and despair. In 1861, the same year that America broke out in the Civil War, his wife Fannie was working on a project with their children that involved a candle and hot wax. Some of the wax dripped on to her skirt, and it immediately caught fire. In order to protect the children, she ran into Henry's study. There he saw her and tried to put the fire out with a rug but to no avail. So the only option left was he wrapped her with his own body, but it was too late. The next morning she died of her injuries. Henry himself was so deeply burned, he couldn't even attend his own wife's funeral. About a year later he received word that his oldest son Charles who had been fighting in the Civil War, had been shot. Shot in the spine, and while he would live, he would be crippled the rest of his life. The Christmas of 1862, Henry wrote in his journal, "While the kids still say Merry Christmas, it will be that way for me no more." The next year, 1863 Christmas Day, he wrote nothing. Said there was just too much despair, he couldn't write anything. But before the Christmas of 1864, he reached down deep and he remembered again what he believed to be true. He found the depth of his faith again and Christmas 1864 he wrote these familiar words:

*I heard the bells on Christmas day  
Their old familiar carols say;  
Wild and sweet the words repeat,  
"Of peace on earth, good will to men."*

*And thought how, as the day began,  
The belfries of all Christendom  
Rolled along th' unbroken song  
Of peace on earth, good will to men.*

*But then in despair I bowed my head:  
"There is no peace on earth," I said,  
"For hate is strong, and it mocks the song  
Of peace on earth and good will to men."*

*But then pealed the bells more loud and deep:  
"God is not dead, nor does He sleep,  
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,  
With peace on earth, good will to men."*

*'Til ringing, singing on it's way,  
The earth revolved from night to day;  
A voice, a chime, a chance sublime,  
Of peace on earth, good will to men.*

Merry Christmas, everybody.

Video Testimony:

*Well I grew up in Miami Dade county. It is the heart of the ghetto. At that particular time of my life, it was very dark. What shaped my worldview was my environment. It really took a hold of me. And then you have a father who was never there – what the home couldn't provide for me, the streets did. I had to find a way to survive. So I pushed away and my whole attitude changed. Got in with the wrong crowd and got into trouble; selling narcotics on the street corner; whatever I wanted I gotta get it; it was all about me. Love.....didn't care for it; didn't like anybody. And I definitely didn't trust anybody but myself.*

*When I was 21, Hurricane Andrew hit Miami. I moved from Miami to Lincoln, NE. At that particular time, I was feeling just empty, lost, alone, no one to talk to – that same old bitter, angry guy who left Miami and just brought it up to Lincoln. Then I met this girl named Jackie. We started dating; she invited me to church with her one Sunday, so I went just to check it out. I remember walking in Berean for the first time and I never seen so many white people in my life. Now, I want you to get the picture, here is this black guy walking into Berean with a head full of hair of dreadlocks. So that was different. But when I walked in, what I experienced was something I will never forget. I'd never seen so many people put their arms around you, say hi, glad you're here, welcome. That was different. Jackie's friend, Kathy, would invite us over for lunch often and I really got to know Don and Kathy very well. Don, you know something was different about him – He was very kind to me when he spoke to me. We set down in his study to have a conversation. He asked me "What do you know about Jesus Christ?" And I said, "Who?" I knew there was a God but I didn't know anything about Jesus. So he gave me the gospel; he told me what Christ had done for me, and he asked me if I would like to ask Him into my life as my Lord and Savior. At that moment I felt like I needed to be saved from my sins; the anger that I had in my heart; my pain; even the bad choices that I made in my life – I needed forgiveness from all of that. So we prayed, and I asked Christ into my life, and I opened up my eyes again.*

*After that, something just changed in my life. Having this new hope that's inside of me is just an overwhelming feeling that you want to share to other people. It motivates me to go out and share the good news to others who do not know Christ, and what God has done for me He has given me a vehicle to do that through the Prison Ministry, or even planting a church in the inner city. It's a passion that burns deep inside that I just have to get it out because of what He has done for me I just want to share that with others. There was so much hurt and I was lost. It is something that when Christ came in that He took all of that away. He gave me what I didn't have and what I needed most.*

I Heard the Bells On Christmas Day, Henry W. Longfellow, 1864  
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