

December 15, 2017

“The Christmas Truce”

I want to share a story from Tom Butts, pastor emeritus of FUMC, Monroeville AL.

Have you ever heard the story of the Christmas Truce in 1914 during World War I? I had heard fragments of it, but always thought it was mostly myth.

In 2001, Professor Stanley Weintraub, a renowned military historian who taught at Pennsylvania State University, restored the story to history in a book titled *Silent Night*. It had been lost in the tides of horror that filled the battlefields of Europe in the months and years after 1914. This forgotten story is one of history’s most powerful Christmas stories.

The war was young, but in the few months since it started in early August, hundreds of thousands had been killed, wounded, or were missing in action. There were pleas for a cessation of hostilities from the Pope and governments not involved in the conflict, but they went unheeded.

In late December it started. The truce bubbled up from the ranks and became so widespread as to impact almost the entire western front. No one was ever certain where and how it began, but Christmas Eve literally became a silent night on that battlefield where heretofore the noise of gunfire had been constant and deafening. In spite of orders to the contrary by superiors and in spite of language barriers, peace broke out between sworn enemies.

It began with music, the universal language. Both sides were singing the same Christmas Carols. The language of the lyrics was different, but there was a common melody and a common emotion.

By Christmas Day, Saxon and Anglo-Saxon soldiers had met in the middle of 'no man's land', and were singing Christmas carols together, swapping cigarettes and whiskey, playing soccer, and enjoying each other’s company like civilized human beings. It still stands as the only time peace spontaneously arose from the lower ranks in a major war, reaching up to the officers and turning sworn enemies into friends. It was as if each side thought they were fraternizing with future friends.

They lit candles on small Christmas trees and serenaded each other with carols. As the power of Christmas grew among them, they broke bread, exchanged addresses and letters, and expressed admiration for one another. And, when their angry superiors ordered them to recommence the shooting, many of them aimed harmlessly high over the heads of their enemies who had become friends.

Surely the forgotten Christmas Truce of 1914 stands as one of the most beautiful moments in the history of the carnage of war. It did not last because the generals and the bureaucrats insisted that 'their war' go on, but it was a thing of beauty while it lasted. Weintraub wrote, "A celebration of the human spirit, the Christmas Truce remains a moving manifestation of the absurdities of war"

A little known Scottish poet of that era, Frederick Niven, said it well in his Carol from Flanders which closed with these lines:

"O ye who read this truthful rime

From Flanders kneel and say:

'God speed the time when every day

Shall be as Christmas Day'."

So, may it be!

Come—Worship; Stay—Learn; Go—Serve