

Christmas Brings Hope (Rev. John Bartol)

I have discovered that Christmas is not a joyful time for everyone. Perhaps, a number of my readers will be separated from family and friends. Others are dealing with a serious health problem or financial need. Psychiatrists and counsellors tell us that during December, their schedules are over-loaded with patients trying to cope with loneliness and depression. We must not turn our backs on those facing Christmas with dread rather than joy.

But, as never before, I believe that at the very heart of Christmas there is a strong message of hope. Christmas affirms that God is not far off, indifferent, with no concern for our needs. On that first Christmas He entered the place where mortals live. He became our "Immanuel – God with us!"

During his public ministry Christ suffered almost every problem and suffering known to mankind – hunger, rejection, loneliness, misunderstanding. He wrote his greatest message of love, not with words but drops of blood, shed in agony and death. He took our sins and sorrows and made them his very own. This means that he understands and can sympathize with us in our weakness and offer grace to help in time of need.

When on earth, Christ never turned anyone away. Now, the same Jesus who came on that first Christmas is with us through his Spirit. In a world of broken dreams and dead-end streets, He can give you the new beginning you need. You can find comfort and hope in the promises of God's word.

Poet, Henry W. Longfellow, tells how his beloved wife died in a tragic fire and later his son was critically wounded during the civil war. As Christmas approached, he felt inexpressibly sad. Then, as he tried to answer questions about war and suffering, he composed the familiar Carol, "I heard the bells on Christmas day."

At first, he was overwhelmed with a feeling of desolation: "And in despair I bowed my head; there is no peace on earth I said, for hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, goodwill to men."

Then, in the midst of that bleak Christmas, Longfellow felt renewed hope as his deep, abiding faith found expression in these words, "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, goodwill to men"

That Christmas Carol, with its promise of hope and peace became a musical anchor for millions of people during the dark days of the American civil war.

Today, whether you are facing Christmas with sorrow or joy, you can know that God is not dead. He knows your need and longs to give you that same hope and assurance. The Christ of Christmas said, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).*"

(Note: Many will recognize the name of Henry Longfellow, author of the poem *Evangeline* with its connection to Grand Pre, N.S. and the expulsion of the Acadians).