

“A Christmas Truce” / 24 December 2014

It happened exactly one hundred years ago, this very night. History's most brutal war was raging across the plains of Belgium and France. Just four months in, and already one million lives had been claimed. Whole cities disappeared, with their ancient palaces, splendid cathedrals, mansions, shops, public gardens, and homes. All lost! In laboratories in Frankfurt, men in white lab coats developed chemical weapons known as “mustard gas.” Europe was adrift with refugees, hungry and cold. Forests and farms were reduced to smoldering ash. In the Belgian flatlands, soldiers hid in muddy trenches, dug by hand, for the towns were flattened and the trees blown to splinters. There they sat on Christmas Eve, one hundred years ago tonight: frightened boys, longing for home, amid the rubble of a village once known as Saint-Yves, a village that is no more.

The gunfire had stopped, but the silence was tense, deadly. Then...across enemy lines, a single voice quavered in the unholy night. Brittle and small, it sang a song of profoundest yearning. “Stille nacht, heilige nacht, alles schläft, einsam wacht.” In time, another voice joined in the homesick carol, then another until the German army was singing. “Stille nacht, heilige nacht, Gottes Sohn, o wie lacht!” In fetid trenches, fifty feet away, the English heard the familiar tune, their enemies singing like angels. They joined in the song. “Silent night, holy night, Son of God, love's pure light.” In that moment, the fearsome night was indeed holy, for mortal enemies raised their voices together in song. So holy, in fact, that men began to venture up out of the safety of their trenches, risking life, offering a hand of friendship to the ones they'd been trying to kill.

It was a hundred years ago tonight, December 24th, 1914, when a new sound was heard, haltingly at first, but growing, growing, until it became confident and joyous, an old familiar carol above the sad and lowly plains of humanity's worst self. The journals and letters of the men who were there that night describe a Christmas truce. Axis and Allies emerged from their foxholes and traded gifts from home—tobacco, magazines, and sweets. Some say there was a friendly soccer match. It happened because one man stared out into the darkness of that horrific night and dared to name it holy. It happened because someone lifted a song of hope and humanity in the dark night of our world.

Well, here we are on our own silent night, one hundred years later, in a world still crossed by trenches, dirty holes where we take our stands against enemies we cannot see! Trenches of race, clan, class, and party! Trenches in our cities, trenches in our hearts! And everything that's broken out there in the world tonight is just the accumulation of all that's broken in you and me.

But listen! Listen. You with your celebrations, your joys, your worries, your doubts! Listen, you with your longings and boredom! A brittle voice, growing stronger, out on the edge of all your busyness and cares. An old familiar carol of hope. Can you hear it? Will you sing it? You who fight the same old battles over and over! Will you come out of your trenches? Christ is forever being born into a troubled world in untold ways. It happened two millennia ago. It happened again exactly one hundred years ago this night. And it can happen tonight, and tomorrow, and in the New Year. It can happen in your relationships, your anxieties, your long-entrenched wars. Ah, but someone has to raise the song of hope! Someone has to call the dark night holy. Someone has to lay down his weapons first. Could it be you? It just might be you. Amen.