

# Ringing the bells of hope

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The year was 1863. Our nation was caught up in the devastating war between the states. It was Civil War with memories of the horrors of Shiloh behind and the blood of Gettysburg more recent. It was Christmastime, and writer Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was grieving the holiday without a son he had lost in the war. In the midst of his grief and what was happening, Wadsworth wrote one of his best known poems, "Christmas Bells."

"I heard the bells on Christmas Day, their old, familiar carols play. And wild and sweet the words repeat of peace on earth, good will to men!"

But the bells were drowned out with cannon fire. "Then from each black, accursed mouth the cannon thundered in the South. And with the sound the carols drowned, of peace on earth, good will to men!"

It struck a note of pain and loss as he thought of the many who had lost sons like him: "It was as if an earthquake rent the hearth-stones of a continent. And made forlorn the households born of peace on earth, good will to men! 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, good will to men!"

In the midst of all of this, there came to his ears the ringing of bells once more. A church was ringing in Christmas Day. Each toll of the bell brought a renewed hope to Longfellow's heart: "Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: "God is not dead; nor doth he sleep! The wrong shall fail, the right prevail, with peace on earth, good will toward men!" (from *The Complete Poetical Works of Longfellow*, 289-90).

Hope. Throughout history, in times of peace and in times of war, in good times and in bad times, in easy times and in hard time, hope is what carries us through.

The ringing of the church bells was not much of a sign by the world's standards, but it was enough to be a sign of hope for Longfellow, even in the midst of hopelessness.

Appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, the Lord has not forgotten His people. Every year at Christmas time, we are reminded of God's great gift of hope and promise for each of us. Christmas may not be much of a sign by the world's standards, but for those who believe, it is a sign of great hope. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwell in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined" (Isaiah 9:2).

With the coming of this light there is hope. "A thrill of hope – the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!" (O Holy Night)

So, "Come on, ring those bells, light the Christmas tree, Jesus is the king, born for you and me. Come on, ring those bells, every-body say, Jesus, we remember this Your birthday." (Come On, Ring Those Bells).