



The Christmas Truce

Or, Why do you think he came?

by Vicki Sairs

I cried the first time I read about the Christmas Truce of 1914. I still cry whenever I think about it, but I want to be clear that these aren't sloppy, sentimental tears. They are healing tears – tears of clarity.

How could you not weep over such a thing? If you tried to concoct a legend or a metaphor to illustrate the sadness of war, you couldn't come up with anything more powerful than the story of the Christmas Truce.

Picture This

Picture northern France and Belgium at the outset of World War I, their fields crisscrossed with miles of muddy trenches and barbed wire barricades. Imagine the men hunkered down in these trenches: tens of thousands of French, British and German soldiers, an entire generation of young men, many of whom will die or be maimed on this battleground.

And now, watch this: It is Christmas Eve, and a heavy frost is falling on the fields and trenches. Some English soldiers peer out across the no man's land that separates them from the enemy, and see strange lights shining on the parapets of the German lines. Is it the sign of an impending attack?

No, the lights are candles burning on little Christmas trees. The German troops are exhibiting one of their culture's more endearing traits: they are taking a holiday seriously, and celebrating it with care. It's Christmas Eve, and this is what you do on Christmas Eve. You light the candles on the Christmas tree.

Amazingly, their government has made sure they have trees for Christmas. The war is only five months old; governments still have energy and resources for that kind of thing.

The candles flicker in the cold night air, but their light can't alter the landscape that stretches between the two armies. Bodies of the dead lie twisted and stiff on the ground, fallen out of the reach of comrades who would retrieve them if they could.

As the British soldiers stare at the light in the darkness and wonder what's going on, something else happens. German voices rise up in the air, singing a song. And then the British soldiers get it, because even though they don't speak German, they know that song: *Silent Night*.

They are suspicious, but they sing a song back, and over the next few hours, something remarkable happens. A few brave German soldiers step into the no man's land, their hands in their pockets to show that they are unarmed. One or two English soldiers venture out of the trenches and approach the enemy cautiously. An informal truce breaks out, and not just

here – it happens up and down the front lines. In some places, they keep the peace for a few hours; in others, they stop fighting for several days. Men who have been shooting at each other shake hands, show each other family photographs, and trade or share tobacco, chocolate, beer and schnapps. They play soccer with a makeshift ball and no referees; they take time to gather and bury their dead.

The truce doesn't happen everywhere, but it makes a lasting impression on those who do experience it. Soldiers write home about how amazing it is to be talking with men they've been trying to kill, and they report on what is being said in more than one conversation: I don't want to shoot, do you?

The truce doesn't last, of course, and the war goes on to claim the lives of 8.5 million men. More than twice that number are wounded, and in the aftermath of the conflict, the stage



German and British soldiers, fraternizing.



A Frank Hurley photograph of the ruined cathedral in Ypres, Belgium.

is set for the rise of Hitler and the next global conflict, World War II.

I've read that one veteran who lived to the age of 85 couldn't hear *Silent Night* without crying, and I believe it. How could you not weep over such a thing?

Healing Tears

But when I cry over this, I try not to be sentimental. I try to learn from my tears.

Why am I crying, really? Am I sad because the human race missed an opportunity to reach out and be peacemakers? Yes and no. Mostly, I'm crying because we don't have it in us to reach out and be peacemakers.

Here's where I'm supposed to immediately add that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. And that is true. But I still don't think we have it in us to be peacemakers on that scale. If we did, wouldn't the church look better than it does? And wouldn't we do a better job of loving each other?

My tears aren't sentimental anymore, because I'm beginning to grasp the idea that Jesus really did come to save us. I'm beginning to see that we couldn't save ourselves. That sounds elementary and obvious, I know. Recognizing your need for a savior is the first step in becoming a Christian. Doesn't every Christian know that?

Maybe so, but it's taken me a long time to live as though I believe it, and I don't think I'm the only one.

Growing up in relative peace and security obscured my view of what was in me. I had only been a Christian for a year or two when I heard theologian R. C. Sproul declare to an audience that we have more in common with Adolph Hitler than with Jesus Christ. I thought he was overstating the case, and refused to take him seriously.

Life, however, has a way of bringing out the Hitler in us all, and I'm ready to admit he was right. What's worse, there seems to be an odd synergy in church life that magnifies the effect of all our little inner Hitlers bumping into each other at close quarters.

Put that way, it sounds funny, but when you're living through it, it can make you cry. I still hurt from things that were said with the best of intentions and things that were done in the name of advancing the cause of Christ. And I cringe to think of the people I've hurt over the years, knowingly and unknowingly.

These wounds I'm talking about aren't life-threatening. It's not World War I, and there are no dead bodies involved, but the pain we inflict on each other takes a toll. We can forgive and we can ask for forgiveness, but our hearts are crisscrossed with trenches we'd rather not enter, and our thoughts sometimes snag on memories that cut like wire. This pain we carry can make us hesitate to reach out to others with the news that Christ died and rose for them. It's as though we're somehow disappointed with the results. Do we really want to invite someone to a body of people who keep hurting each other?

It took the words of another speaker, Henry Nouwen, to give me the perspective I needed on this dilemma, this awful problem of being human. He spoke in a beautiful church to hundreds of people, describing what he'd learned from his efforts to live in community with his brothers and sisters. With a trace of surprise in his voice, he said, "We have to spend all our time forgiving each other for not being God."



A soldier reflects.

I heard those words, spoken by a gentle man who had also traded grievous wounds with those he loved, and I wept. Why did I find it surprising that Christians would hurt each other? We are so far from perfect. Why did I keep expecting more from other Christians than they could deliver? They can't be God to me, and I can't be God to them.

Why did I think Jesus came, after all?

Slowly, I'm beginning to see the answer to this question. The Christmas Truce helps me focus on it. It's such a picture of the frailty of human effort: candles in the night, handshakes in the dawn, and death following along behind it all.

Jesus isn't like that. He made peace with God for us, and his truce is unbreakable. When I think of that, I can cry healing tears. **BB**

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