

May I begin by recalling an extraordinary event that happened spontaneously on this night many (92) years ago. It was on Christmas Eve in the early months of the First World War that peace inexplicably broke out on the Western Front. The trenches were already well dug, and in some places less than the distance of a football field away from each other were German, French, and British infantrymen dealing with the monotony of modern trench warfare.

A lovely French film, called *õJoyeux Noel,ö* has been recently released that tells a version of that event. A German tenor is among the conscripts who, upon hearing the Scots pipers across no-man's land playing Christmas carols, decides to stand up above the trench where the German command has placed Christmas trees with lighted candles for the sake of morale, and he begins to sing *Stille Nacht*. The nearby French and Scottish troops join in, and before long all sides have emerged from their protective hiding to venture out across the frozen waste littered with corpses to exchange gifts, the likes of champagne, tobacco, and German chocolate and to share pictures of loved ones and stories of home. All this culminates with a unique worship service presided over by the Scottish Anglican priest, which he later describes to the Bishop as the *õmost important massö* of his life.

Dazed by this gratuitous and unauthorized expression of holiday cheer, the lieutenants in command agree together to a truce, only for Christmas Eve. But the next day sees the troops playing soccer on the no-man's land between the trenches. When one side learns of plans for an artillery barrage on the other, they warn them and all together cross over to the safety of their own bunker. Then, anticipating the retaliatory bombardment that is bound to come, they all move together back to cover on the other side. Of course, the inevitable result of this Christmas Eve truce is no surprise. When letters from the front fall into the hands of the censors, the command is outraged and punishment is meted out. The Germans are sent to the Russian front. The French officer's high-ranking father disowns him. The Scottish priest is sent home in disgrace and inhibited by the Bishop from exercising his ministry any further.

It's no surprise that this outbreak of peace is crushed by the high command. The film begins with chilling scenes of English, French, and German school children in turn reciting horrible rhymes learning by rote to demonize their European neighbors. It ends with a sermon at a mass for new reinforcements just arriving at the front celebrated by the Bishop. He uses the saying of Mark's Jesus, *õI came not to bring peace but a sword,ö* to openly persuade them that they must kill the Germans for Christ to *õsave civilization.ö* This frame of demonization of the *õotherö* seems to suggest that something unparalleled took place on that Christmas Eve that revealed a reality that is usually hidden to us.

That is the question I want to lift up for us this evening. Are the peace and joy of Christmas something special and unusual, or is it truly the way we are made to be, a way that is normally hidden from us? Let me put it a bit differently. There are two worship

services portrayed in this film, one a treasonous mass attended by hundreds of dazed soldiers technically at war with one another but now experiencing a brief reprieve and worshipping alongside their sworn enemies at a Christmas Mass celebrated by a priest who otherwise serves as a stretcher bearer. And the other with reinforcements, later on and slightly away from the fighting and dying, seems to have the purpose of inspiring them for the arduous task ahead. It makes their faith the agent or servant of the cause of the nation. "You are the very defenders of civilization itself," says the Bishop who is the celebrant in the sermon he delivers, "the forces of good against the forces of evil. For this war is indeed a crusade to save the freedom of the world."

Which of these two masses constitutes true worship? That's my question. Are we at war with the forces of evil, with civilization at stake, whoever our apparent enemy may happen to be the moment, so that Christianity and our worship are rightly understood as moral and spiritual support for the cause of good against evil? Or is it our tendency to hijack our cultural tradition and religious liturgy, its language and rhetoric, and to harness them and put them into the service of nationalistic, geopolitical, or even economic goals? And is it that tendency that is evil? After all, that tendency inevitably blurs our vision and confuses our politics and our religion so that both seem to disappear in the "fog of war."

Christmas is about power. It's about how the unbelievable, the preposterous, triumphs over the usual, the normal and the expected, how weakness finally overcomes might. Plenty of good reasons present themselves for why such a truce is not likely to have occurred tonight in Baghdad. But if it had, would we be any more believing than those who heard the rumors nearly a hundred years ago of what had happened that night on the Western Front? In his book about the incident called Silent Night, historian Stanley Weintraub speaks of "troops mesmerized by the miraculous Christmas peace, a sort of waking dream they could hardly believe." That's my question! Was it a dream, or was it waking from a dream? Were they "mesmerized" by an unfortunate delusion the product of their collective exhaustion and stress? Or had the "fog lifted" just enough so that for the first time they could see a brother in the enemy soldier they had only yesterday tried to kill?

For me this miraculous truce is a metaphor for the event we celebrate and commemorate every Christmas. It's as if every year on this night we enter a different time and space, almost in spite of ourselves. Anything seems somehow possible, and this spontaneous Christmas truce is *prima facie* evidence. Hopefully our liturgy tonight is not a desperate attempt to "create" a feeling of unity, of joy and hope. Rather it's the calm and ordered recognition that something has happened in another time and another place and that we can enter into it, or it can enter into us. Tentatively, fragilely, timidly, but nevertheless we are confident that we needn't remain any longer in the trenches we so often seem to occupy as if on orders from some high command.

We celebrate the coming of Christ: His coming so long ago in Bethlehem, His coming at the end of time as Judge who rules the world from a Cross. And we celebrate his continual coming to greet us across the frozen no-man's land of our lives to make friends with us. Once a fearful enemy, now, in Christ, God comes to us as forgiveness, as

one who likes us and wants to spend time with us, to share our family pictures, to play as one of us. This continual coming occasionally catches us off guard like a cease-fire out of nowhere, undeclared and unauthorized. So that that time and space in Bethlehem invades and replaces our own mundane time and space with one charged with the dazzling light of truth, possibility, and hope.

And perhaps if we see enough Christmases, if we are often enough surprised by the friendly welcome of that stranger who comes as forgiveness, if we catch ourselves dozing during a sermon or the long Eucharistic prayer on Sunday mornings and greet the experience with amusement rather than chagrin, we might get it. Then we might be said to have begun to be formed by that time and space that interrupted the war on the Western Front, and that landed on earth so long ago in Bethlehem to the witness of shepherds and to the shock of kings. It can happen slowly almost imperceptibly, or it can seem to suddenly disrupt the routine continuity of our lives. But it is this being formed in forgiveness, in *Shalom*, shaped by the vision of Peace from the end of time, what the American tradition has called the "peaceable kingdom," where not only are there no longer enemies but where the lion and the lamb are kinfolk. That's what our Christmas service invites us to notice and to learn. It prepares us to live in a new way. We practice skills and gestures that are of no use in the world of violence and war but only in the New world that is dawning and that our worship and our celebration of Christmas anticipates—singing about peace and forgiveness, sharing our resources with those who don't have them, embracing strangers, praying for our enemies and wishing them Christmas blessings.

A friend of mine tells a story about the confirmation class he taught. He asked the class what the meaning of the word "epiphany" was, not the season of the Church year that has the same name but the word itself. After some silence one girl said it means this, and she slapped her open palm on her forehead to make the universal sign for "Ah-ha!" When the Magi finally arrived at the cave where the baby and its mother sheltered, and instead of a royal heir surrounded by signs of power and wealth, they found only a babe lying in "mean estate," in an animal feeding trough, only then did they begin to understand.

T.S. Eliot's narrator in the poem "The Journey of the Magi" recalls the terms of their epiphany: "There was a Birth, certainly, . . . this Birth was . . . like Death, our death." Having been awakened by the Peace they found there, they had died to the world they had known before, they could never go back to the way it was. Like the enemies out of their trenches who became friends between the lines on that silent night in 1914, they were by that epiphany emptied of hate, formed by Peace. And so spoiled as soldiers, as warriors, they could return home, back to their "trenches," but only by betraying the command of Herod. They could return home but only "by another way." Eliot's poem tells it this way, "We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,/But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,/With an alien people clutching their gods." So may it be with us. *Shalom*, Merry Christmas.