



This Religion column is a regular feature written for the Gallup Independent by Gallup area residents, representing different faith communities, who share their ideas about bringing a spiritual perspective into our daily lives and community issues. For information about contributing a guest column, contact Elizabeth Hardin-Burrola at The Independent: (505) 863-6811 ext. 218 or lizreligion01@yahoo.com.

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I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day, and What Did They Say?

My wife, Colleen, has a wonderful way of creating the Spirit of Christmas in our apartment, and our office. She hauls out boxes of treasures and finds ways to make them communicate the mood and message of the season. Today I picked up from her stack of Christmas books *Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas* by Ace Collins.

A most striking story lies behind “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day” penned by none other than Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Longfellow remains for many Americans their favorite poet. His family roots went back to the 1676 on this continent, though he lived in the 1800’s. He started school at three, and by age 19 was already a professor of Modern Language at Bowdoin College. Yet in his 20’s, he was viewed as one of the country’s top scholars and poets.

But life became difficult when he lost his first wife at a tender age, and some years later a second wife, with whom he had 5 children. His fame and fortune could not assuage his sadness. His faith was severely tested, and even more so when his beloved country fell into the Civil War.

Collins writes: “An ardent believer in the power of God to move on earth, the poet all but pleaded with his Lord to end the madness of war. When his oldest son...was wounded in battle and sent home to recover, the poet’s prayers turned to rage...He asked his friends and his God ‘Where is the peace?’”

This is the same question people of faith should be asking today, as we witness the painful realities of Iraq, Lebanon, Dafur. Regardless of our political persuasion, we should cry out to God for peace. Liberals are very quick to criticize and blame—one wonders how often they **pray**? Conservatives defend and justify—one wonders how often **they** pray?

I fret that the churches I go to are too seldom wrestling with God over “peace on earth.” And I acknowledge that I can watch endless television reports and read numerous editorials, and ignore the One who can do something about it. Where is the passion and prayers of God’s people? Are we burdened for our world, do our hearts burn for peace? Could it be “that we have not because we ask not?” (James 4:2)

It was on Christmas Day, 1863, that Longfellow came to grips with his anger and doubt, likely inspired by the tolling of the church bells:



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*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.*

*I thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along th'unbroken song
Of peace on earth, goodwill 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, goodwill to men."*

*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, goodwill to men."*

These are just four of the seven verses, but they solemnly and steadfastly bear witness to a God who loves his world, who upholds the Creation with his fatherly hand.

To be sure, there are cries of cynicism and despair—shaking a fist at God. And thousands chose to live there.

As for me and my house, we prefer to line up with Longfellow, singing his song with renewed appreciation, praying for the peace we long for, acknowledging the Christ of Christmas who came to bring peace, if we would but follow Him.

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