

Longfellow's Serenade: Played on the Bells

We've just come through a Christmas richly blessed for some and sadly suffered for others. And this was brought home powerfully on the Sunday before Christ's birthday by Jack Graham, a Texas minister. What caught my attention as I was channel surfing that day was his mention of the poet, Longfellow, always a favorite of my grandparents and perhaps the first poet to really catch my attention, when my 5th grade class was assigned by miss Donna Goodin to memorize "The Wreck of the Hesperus."

The images in that story poem, of a schooner being dashed upon "The Reef of Norman's Woe," and the picture of the proud old skipper's little daughter lashed to a floating mast, her blond hair rising and falling with the ebb and flow of the waves, struck me, as kid who had been intrigued by the waters of rivers and lakes and ponds since birth.

Graham's message was all about the conflicts befalling Longfellow back in 1862. (He had just become nationally famous for his two popular narrative poems, "The Song of Hiawatha" and "The Courtship of Miles Standish.") But at the same time, he was crushed by the fiery loss of his beloved wife, the death of a dear friend, and the horrible carnage of The Civil War.

That's what makes my second favorite Christmas carol, written by Longfellow so poignant. Here's how it goes: "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 his wife's death haunts the second verse: "But 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."

Then the bells, with divine defiance, answer the poet with new hope: “Then sang the bells, more wild and sweet,/ God is not dead, nor doth He sleep./ The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,/ With Peace on earth Good Will to Men.”

The full impact of this beautiful hymn is perhaps lost on most modern hearers, because bells, ringing out a familiar melody are seldom heard anymore. Edgar Allen Poe, the demented poet, heard them and wrote, “Bells, bells, bells bells, /The tintinnabulation of the bells.”

And more powerful still is Tennyson’s New Year’s Eve farewell to a hectic year: “Ring out Wild bells/ Against the wild sky/ The year is dying/ Let it die.”

So the year’s end is a mystery: bright with hope for some, and ominous for others. As always, the apostle, Paul, speaks out most powerfully in his farewell to all the suffering he has endured for the gospels’ sake – counting his abuses “as dung,” compared to the immensity of the gift Jesus won for all mankind by his agony on the cross:

“Forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching for those that are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” Phil 3: 13, 14.

Likewise, we in America can greet the new year either as a door, opening on great changes for the better, or a dark passageway fraught with multiplied disasters. I choose the bells of hope, like those in the newly - restored Notre Dame Cathedral, ringing out “wild and sweet” with joy, heralding of the dawn of peace on earth and good will among men.

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