

Longfellow's Christmas Day

By Lindsay Terry

Tragedy struck the home of America's most popular poet. On July 9, 1861, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's wife, Fanny, was near an open window sealing locks of her daughter's hair in a packet, using hot sealing wax. It was never known whether a spark from a match or the sealing wax was the cause, but suddenly her dress caught fire and engulfed her with flames. Her husband, sleeping in the next room, was awakened by her screams. He desperately tried to put out the fire and save his wife. He was severely burned on his face and hands.

She, tragically burned, slipped into a coma the next day and died. His grievous burns would not even allow him to attend her funeral. He seemed to lock the anguish within his soul. Because he continued to work at his craft, only his family knew of his personal suffering. They could see it in his eyes and observe his long periods of silence. His white beard, so identified with him, was one of the results of the tragedy - the burn scars on his face made shaving almost impossible.

Although a legend in his own time, he still needed the peace that God gives to His children. On Christmas Day, three years following the horrible accident — at age 57 — he sat down to try to capture, if possible, the joys of the season. He began:

*"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."*

As he came to the third stanza he was stopped by the thought of the condition of his beloved country. The Civil War was in full swing. The Battle of Gettysburg was not long past. Days looked dark, and he probably asked himself the question, "How can I write about 'peace on earth, good will to men' in this war-torn country, where brother fights against brother and father against son?" But he kept writing — and what did he write?

*"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!"*

It seems as if he could have been writing for our kind of a day. Then as all of us should do, he turned his thoughts to the One who solves all problems—the One who can give true and perfect peace, and continued writing:

*"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 to men."*



And so we have the marvelous Christmas carol, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day." A musician named J. Baptiste Calkin wrote the musical setting that has helped make the carol a favorite.

Just as that Christmas in 1864 was made better for Longfellow, you can experience a Christmas that will be the greatest ever. You can actually find the peace that Longfellow wrote about in the carol - true peace with God. As you pillow your head tonight, you can know that you are God's child. You can know for sure that you have a home in Heaven, prepared just for you.

You see, Jesus did not come just to be a "Babe" in a manger. He came to earth to die for the sins of the whole world - for your sins and mine. You may be saying to yourself right now, "I would like to know that peace. I would like to know Jesus in a personal way" You can. Consider God's plan for your salvation.

We are all sinners before God.

"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." (1 John 1:8)

"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on Him (Jesus) the iniquity of us all." (Isaiah 53:6)

There must be payment for our sins.

"For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 6:23)

"How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" (Hebrews 2:3a)

"It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment." (Hebrews 9:27)

Jesus came to earth to die for our sins.

"For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God." (1 Peter 3:18a)

"...while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8b)

Jesus invites you to be saved, TODAY!

"He (Jesus) came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name." (John 1:11-12)

"For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Romans 10:13)

Right where you are, pray this prayer:

Dear Lord Jesus, thank You for dying to pay for my sins. I realize that I am a sinner and need Your cleansing. I accept Your payment on the Cross for my sins. I place my soul in Your hands and ask You to come into my heart and save me, right now. Help me to live for You each day. Amen.

The Harvester
Why Was
Jesus Born

in a Barn?

— By Joe McKeever

I grew up on a farm. I know about barns. They are dirty and cold and the last place you'd ever want to bring a newborn baby. And yet, here is the Lord of heaven and earth allowing His Son—even willing Him! —to be born in a dirty stable. What are we to make of this?

I am certain there must be a hundred reasons why Jesus was born in that stable in Bethlehem, and just as sure that we know only a handful of them. The simplest answer is that there was no room for Mary and Joseph in the local inn. But there has to be much more to it than that.

One: It Was the Only Place Available

Jesus could have been born in the finest mansion, but it was not made available to Him. He goes where He is made welcome.

You will see it all through Scripture: "When you enter a city," Jesus told His disciples, "whoever does not receive you or heed your words, shake the dust off your feet" They were not to give God's truth to the hostile or disrespectful, for to do so would be "casting pearls before swine." God goes where He is wanted.

Sometimes when I'm making this point to children, I'll ask them the old riddle: "Where does the 600-pound gorilla go?" They call out, "Anywhere he wants to!" And you would think that would be the answer to the question "Where does the Lord of heaven and earth go?" But it isn't. Listen to the Lord Jesus: "I stand at the door and knock.

If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will sup with him and he with me:' Tell me if that is not the most amazing picture in the Bible—Jesus Christ, the Son of God, humbly asking us to receive Him. He does not force Himself on anyone, but goes into homes and hearts where He is made welcome.

Two: God Was Making a Statement About Himself Jesus is not like any other royalty you've ever heard of. Kings come with great entourages, accompanied by pageantry and demands. Jesus was born in a stable to humble Jewish parents, with His only callers that night lowly shepherds. Look closely: God is telling us something about Himself.

Nothing about our God is like the kings of the earth. They're into appearances and image; God is all about truth and love. Over a century ago, the British pastor Charles Spurgeon* said: "How could the kings of earth receive the Lord? He is the Prince of Peace, and they delight in war! He breaks



their bows and cut their spears in sunder; He burns their war-chariots in the fire.
"How could kings accept the humble Savior? They love grandeur and pomp, and He is all simplicity and meekness. He is a carpenter's Son, and the fisherman's companion.
"How can princes find room for the newborn Monarch? Why, He teaches us to do to others as we would that they should do to us, and this is a thing which kings would find very hard to reconcile
with the knavish tricks of politics and the grasping designs of ambition:'
The prophets of old had said of the Messiah, "Behold, your king is coming to you, gentle, and mounted on a donkey!" One day, the Lord Jesus entered Jerusalem just in that way: the King of kings and Lord of lords—riding on a burro. Not very grand or impressive by our standards. It's like forgoing the limo and entering town astride a bicycle.
Had Jesus employed image con-
The Harvester
sultants, they would have advised Him to take a cue from Absalom, the son of David, who rode around the city in a chariot pulled by a team of horses and accompanied by fifty runners. Like
modern rock stars, David's boy knew that the size of the entourage said volumes about the celebrity. But Jesus was not like any other "star." Anyone doubting that has only to see how Jesus was born (in a stable), how He lived (without a place to lay His head), and how He died (on a Roman cross, the object of slurs and slander and saliva).
Three: Where Else Should a Lamb Be Born?
In the early days of the human race, Cain brought vegetables to the Lord as an offering, while his brother Abel brought a lamb. One lamb for one person. Later, as God was preparing to deliver the Isra-
elites from Egypt, Moses instructed the people to kill a lamb and smear its blood around the door to protect the family members. One lamb for a family.
Then God gave Israel instructions for the annual Day of Atonement offering. One lamb would be slain for the nation. Eventually, in the New Testament, we see John the Baptist announcing that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Someone has said the entire story of redemption is summed up in three lines of Scripture:

"Where is the lamb?" (Gen. 22:7).

"Behold the Lamb!" (John 1:29,36)

"Worthy is the Lamb!" (Rev. 5:12).

Years ago, my seminary professor, Malcolm Tolbert, wrote an article asking and answering the question why Jesus was born in a stable. Had Jesus been born in the mansion on the hilltop, Tolbert said, few people would have felt welcome in His presence. But He was born in a barn; anyone can come there. The lowly shepherds did not hesitate to enter a stable and bow before the Child.

Then and now, anyone willing to humble himself may come to Jesus.

— Pulpit Helps

(Dr. McKeever pastors First Baptist Church of Kenner, Louisiana.)

*Source for the Spurgeon quote: The Christ of Christmas by James Montgomery Boice, Moody Press, 1983, p 64.

Page 7

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Page 7