

I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day

By Harry Eskew

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) is one of the best known of American poets. During a time of personal and national crisis, he wrote the poem that has become a familiar Christmas hymn. Hymnologist William J. Reynolds vividly recounts the circumstances under which the poem was written.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote the hymn [I heard the bells on Christmas day] actually on Christmas Day in 1863 for the children of the Sunday School of the Unitarian Church of the Disciples, Boston. The Civil War was at its worst. Six months earlier the Battle of Gettysburg had resulted in 40,000 men having been killed, wounded, or reported missing on both sides. Following a long siege, Vicksburg had been taken by the Union forces and 30,000 Confederate soldiers taken prisoner. In fact, Longfellow's own son Charley, 19 years of age, had been wounded in the war about a month before. Longfellow, a recent widower, was caring for his son in their own home. It is not difficult to understand how Longfellow bowed his head in despair and thought "there is no peace on earth." The poet pours out his soul for peace and good will in a very troubled day.

(Handbook to The Baptist Hymnal , ed. Wesley L. Forbis, Nashville: Convention Press,1992, 150-151).

It was not until 1872 that Longfellow's poem was set to music. The English organist, John Baptiste Calkin, used the poem in a processional accompanied with a melody he had previously used as early as 1848.

The following two stanzas of Longfellow's poem referring to the war follow stanza four in his original:

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound the carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn, the households born
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

In this hymn, Longfellow associates the birth of Jesus with the promise of peace, affirming the victory of good over evil.

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
 The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
 A voice, a chime,
 A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will 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, good-will 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, good-will to men."