

IN A WORLD LIKE THIS

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In the earliest gospel accounts of the Christmas story, a beleaguered couple undertakes a harrowing journey to obey Caesar's edict that everyone be registered and taxed at their birthplace. Despite the imminent arrival of their firstborn child, the couple can't find a place to stay. The reason this child matters more than others, the story goes on to say, is that the Jews need someone to help cast off the shackles of their Roman overlords, whose harsh rule has become increasingly despotic. Maybe this child can make a difference.

At its heart, Christmas is about feeling desperate and needing a source of hope. It's about feeling lost and needing comfort. It's about feeling oppressed and needing to break free. Today, everywhere we look, from borders close at hand to battlegrounds in distant lands, we see scenes of desperation and despair. Maybe the gloom has shrouded your spirit as well. If so, then you're ready for Christmas.

Despite the origin of Christmas, the most ubiquitous icon of the holiday today isn't a baby in a manger, but rather a chubby man with a flowing white beard. No one fits the image of Santa Claus better than the 19th-century American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, whose beard set a standard no modern Santa could ever meet.

Behind Longfellow's beard, however, lies a story not of jolly and merry, but of pain and sorrow. I will be sharing some of Longfellow's poetry with you today, because his circumstances and his story resonate with those of our time as well.

In contemporary terms, Longfellow was the 19th-century's leading producer of shows for Netflix. As the poet Dana Gioia, former head of the National Endowment for the Arts, puts it, "Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was the most popular poet in American history. His work commanded a readership that is almost unimaginable today even for best-selling novels. In terms of their reach and influence, Longfellow's poems resembled studio-era Hollywood films: they were popular works of art enjoyed by huge, diverse audiences that crossed all social classes and age groups. Writing in a period before the electronic media usurped the serious literary artist's role as society's story-teller, Longfellow did as much as any author or politician of his time to shape the way nineteenth-century Americans saw themselves, their nation, and their past."

Longfellow's influence continues today. His most memorable lines and phrases continue to resound: "footprints on the sands of time," "into each life some rain must fall," "one if by land and two if by sea," and perhaps my favorite, "the lowest ebb is the turn of the tide."

Longfellow's most popular poem is so well known that even people who haven't read it can recite its opening lines: "Listen, my children, and you shall hear / Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere." The poem is quintessential Longfellow: he takes a complicated and peripheral incident in pre-Revolutionary War America and retells it with masterful pacing, narrative clarity, and emotional power. Historians have long complained that Longfellow got his facts wrong and put too much focus on Revere. But Longfellow wasn't an historian; he was a storyteller. In telling his tale, Longfellow created a symbolic hero who awakened America to fight for freedom.

As Gioia says, "Published a few months before the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter initiated America's bloodiest war [the Civil War], "Paul Revere's Ride" was Longfellow's reminder to New Englanders of the courage their ancestors demonstrated in forming the Union. Another 'hour of darkness and peril and need,' the poem's closing lines implicitly warn, now draws near. The author's intentions were overtly political – to build public resolve to fight slavery and protect the Union – but he embodied his message in a poem compellingly told in purely narrative terms. Longfellow's "Paul Revere's Ride" was so successful that modern readers no longer remember it as a poem but as a national legend.

In important ways, Longfellow's poem "Christmas Bells" – his most popular poem after "Paul Revere's Ride," though most people today know it as a song – did more to set the Christmas story in its proper context than any other story, poem, or song before or since. Most people think of the poem in terms of the prosaic and even slightly saccharin setting of the first stanza:

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!

(A note about Longfellow's sexist language. All seven stanzas of this poem end with the word "men," which in the language of the day meant everyone. While Longfellow wasn't Unitarian, he was a close friend of William Cullen Bryant, another popular 19th-century poet, who was a member of All Souls. I'm confident that if Longfellow were writing today he would end the stanzas with the word "all," as our hymnal does. Nonetheless, I will voice Longfellow's poem as he wrote it, though we will sing the revised version as our closing hymn.)

After an unremarkable opening to the poem, Longfellow goes on to the heart of the matter – the ability of Christmas bells to pull him out of the depths of his despair about the present and his fear for the future. These feelings were partly personal. Longfellow's first wife, Mary Potter, had died from the complications of a miscarriage, and his second wife, Fanny Appleton, had recently died as well.

In 1861, on the cusp of the Civil War, Fanny was sealing envelopes with hot wax when her muslin dress caught fire. She rushed into the library where Henry was working, and he tried to smother the flames by wrapping her in a rug. By the time the fire was extinguished, Fanny had been burned beyond recovery. She died the following day. Henry was also badly burned, especially on his hands and his face – so badly burned that he was unable to attend Fanny’s funeral. He grew his now-trademark white beard to hide the disfiguring scars on his face.

In his despair, Longfellow found himself unable to write poems or stories of his own, but he did not become morose. Instead, he turned to translating Dante. An accomplished linguist, Longfellow spoke at least eight languages and could read and write half a dozen more. Through his work as a translator, he almost single-handedly introduced America to European literature, especially Dante. Longfellow’s translation of all three books of Dante’s “Divine Comedy” are regarded by many scholars as Longfellow’s greatest achievement. The translation is highly valued even today for its accuracy and fidelity.

In 1863, two years after Fanny’s death, Longfellow suffered another hard blow. His son Charley decided to enlist in the First Massachusetts Artillery and join the Civil War effort. Though Longfellow was a staunch abolitionist, he feared for his son’s future and had forbidden him from volunteering to fight. In loving defiance of his father’s wishes, Charley had written to his father, saying, “I have tried hard to resist the temptation of going without your leave, but I cannot any longer. I feel it to be my first duty to do what I can for my country, and I would gladly lay down my life for it – if it would be of any good.”

Some months after Charley enlisted, he was badly wounded in a battle in Virginia, with a bullet nicking his spine, leaving his future mobility in doubt. Longfellow traveled to Washington, where he retrieved his son from a hospital and took him back home to Massachusetts. They arrived in early December, with Longfellow deeply depressed about Charley’s condition and about the uncertain trajectory of the war.

Then he heard Christmas bells, which had been sounding their message of holiday hope for century upon century. The bells caught Longfellow’s ear.

He writes:

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!

But for Longfellow, the sounds of the Civil War threatened to drown out the sounds of the Christmas bells. In the following stanzas, the first two of which are typically left out of the holiday carol version, Longfellow writes:

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!

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!”

During one of Longfellow’s trips to England and the European continent, he had developed a close friendship with Charles Dickens, during the time immediately preceding Dickens’ publication of *A Christmas Carol*. Dickens would go on to write *A Tale of Two Cities*, his landmark chronicle of tyranny and terror set against the backdrop of the French Revolution. Their friendship sharpened Longfellow’s critique of slavery in America, leading him to write a number of poems on the topic.

One such poem, aptly titled “The Warning,” ends with the stern caution that slavery “may, in some grim revel, raise [its] hand and shake the pillars of this Commonweal, till the vast temple of our liberties, a shapeless mass of wreck and rubbish lies.”

Another, titled “The Arsenal at Springfield,” describes a similar scene:

The tumult of each sacked and burning village;
The shout that every prayer for mercy drowns;
The soldiers' revels in the midst of pillage;
The wail of famine in beleaguered towns...

I hear even now the infinite fierce chorus,
The cries of agony, the endless groan,
Which, through the ages that have gone before us,
In long reverberations reach our own...

Longfellow's infinite fierce chorus – the cries of agony and endless groans – have reached our time as well. They continue to reverberate all around us, both near and far. But wait, Longfellow insists, that's not the end of the story. If we listen long enough and carefully enough, we will eventually hear another sound emerging from the fog of war.

He concludes "The Arsenal at Springfield" with these lines:

Down the dark future, through long generations,
The echoing sounds grow fainter and then cease;
And like a bell, with solemn, sweet vibrations,
I hear once more the voice of God say, "Peace!"

Peace! and no longer from its brazen portals
The blast of War's great organ shakes the skies!
But beautiful as songs of the immortals,
The holy melodies of love arise.

Longfellow's insights at a time of impending war apply to our time as well. He recognizes that the clash between the slaveholders and the abolitionists in America would probably take generations to resolve – even after the fighting had stopped. But, he says, over long generations down a dark future, the battle will eventually diminish and then stop altogether. The question is how we should respond in the meantime.

In Longfellow's poem "The Light of Stars," which served as our reading for this morning, he writes:

O fear not in a world like this,
And thou shalt know ere long,
Know how sublime a thing it is
To suffer and be strong.

Whether in a time of war or in a time of hardship, the challenge is to accept whatever suffering comes our way yet remain strong in the face of it. This is a sublime experience, Longfellow says – to know amid suffering that you have the strength to endure it.

From where does this strength come? For Longfellow, and for us, it comes from faith – faith in ourselves and each other, faith in the spirit that unites each of us with all of us, and faith in the possibility of a better future. Don't be afraid in a world like this, Longfellow says, because your faith will keep you strong.

This is the message that the bells conveyed to Longfellow on Christmas Day. Against a backdrop of a debilitating war, confronted by the pain of personal loss, Longfellow heard the sound of hope – the possibility of a better future. He concludes his poem "Christmas Bells" by declaring:

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
“God is not dead, nor doth God sleep;
 The Wrong shall fail,
 The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men.”