

Ninety-five years ago, Christmas Eve 1914, on a World War I battlefield a miracle happened. It was the dreaded western European front. In only five short months of war, both Belgium and France had fallen to German occupation. In this new kind of warfare where soldiers had repeat rifles and machine guns, the casualties of war were greatly increased.

1914 was a bitter winter. Trenches were dug to house and protect troops, but these trenches were either mired with mud sometimes knee deep or frozen cold. At times the soft sides of the trenches would collapse inward over soldiers and their dead comrades awaiting proper burial. This war was also different in that the men fighting one another were only 70, 50, or 30 feet away from each other and could hear the taunts of the enemy even if they could not see them. The stage was set for a most miserable Christmas Eve when...

German soldiers placed little pine trees on top the parapets of their trenches with lit candles adorning the trees. Then they began to sing Christmas carols, *Silent Night*. The British and French responded with carols of their own, and suddenly the soldiers were clapping in praise to the singing of their enemies.

In between the two enemy lines was “no man’s land” where the bodies of comrades killed were silent, awaiting a time when they could be retrieved and buried. And then banners made from sheets began to appear above the rim of the trenches with the words: “you no shoot, we no shoot.”

One might call it a grassroots effort if there had been any grass, but the frozen ground did give rise to a spontaneous call for a truce between soldiers intent just a few hours earlier on killing one another.

That Christmas Eve 95 years ago men ventured out onto “no man’s land” and exchanged gifts of drink, cigars, cake, and cocoa. They shared pictures of family back home with an enemy who also had loved ones from whom they were separated. Some even shared addresses for visits “after the war.” One letter written by a soldier and sent back to England tells of a worship service where they sang “O Come All Ye Faithful” and “While Shepherds Watched their Flocks by Night.”

The next day, Christmas Day, the truce continued for the sake of retrieving and burying the dead. Accounts say that reverence was given to each other’s fallen. After the tasks of solemn ceremonies, the men of both sides continued to socialize and eventually a soccer game commenced. In a letter later published in England, one soldier writes these words: *We can hardly believe that we’ve been firing at them for the last week or two—it all seems so strange.*

For the soldiers fighting trench warfare, this Christmas truce was miracle and blessing. For those “in charge” of the war and who were celebrating in the warmth of estate houses some distance away, and even for the religious clerics, who encouraged this war by demonizing the Germans and declaring it a “Holy War,” this truce was not miracle but treason.

No one knew on this Christmas Eve just how long this war would last or how costly it would be. Yet, the memory of this Christmas miracle survived.

As I thought about tonight, I imagined that many of us come here to share the beauty of this season with those we love--the lights, the carols, the feasts. But many of us come also in a spirit of worship because we want more for our world; we want a miracle of sorts.

The miracle of a child born is a miracle of new beginnings, new possibilities, wrapped in the flesh and blood of tiny hands and feet and placed in our hands to hold, nurture, and love. And we watch with wonder and delight as this child’s life unfolds.

Tonight we long for a Christmas Eve miracle. We wonder if people will ever draw on their deep reserves of courage to venture out onto “no man’s land” to encounter the other--the person who is different than they are; the person they have heard demonized and condemned.

Tonight we long for a Christmas Eve miracle. We wonder if families will risk reconciliation and forgiveness; if wrongs can be made right; if relationships long neglected can be rekindled; if love can again be born within the human heart.

Tonight we expect a Christmas Eve miracle. We come to see and hear that the Holy One cares deeply about creation, cares so much that constantly God comes to us in the most unexpected ways--like a child--so that our eyes will be opened to the miracle that stands before us, so that we will face the possibility that presents itself even if we face it with fear and reserve.

Tonight we expect, we long for the miracle of novelty. We long to be surprised by love, by God, by community, and by our world. We believe the world can be better than it is. We celebrate the good while gazing into the distance for the miracle of peace and harmony for all.

We thank God for our blessings while working hard to bring about the miracle that all will be fed and clothed and housed.

We go home to the warmth of hearth and home with an awareness that miracles can happen even in a stable, but that it is a shame for the God in any baby to be born out in the cold. And we dare to venture out into those scary places where we meet “the other”, where both danger and potential for goodness abide.

Tonight’s miracle began with a child born long ago in Bethlehem, but it begins again with us. We believe the world needs a miracle and we commit ourselves anew to making miracles happen in our lives, our families, our community, and our world.

Miracles are not often one big complete transformation produced by the wave of a magic wand; miracles happen with a first step; the courage to step out onto frozen ground with the hope that our courage will be met with the same longings in the hearts of people everywhere, in every land, and in every place.

Why is this night Holy? Because tonight we remember that miracles do indeed happen and that when they do, the world is forever changed, and they can happen again and again *if only* we have the courage to risk, the courage to venture into the night where the light of God will lead us to whatever miracles may await us. May it be so!