



December 25, 2022



*The Christmas Truce* by Soren Hawke

## ***Pax Dei***

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A Letter from an English Soldier



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Isaiah writes with the fatigue from decades of battle, too many youths killed in senseless struggles for power and land by a few greedy men.

Interspersed among the chapters of anger towards the monarchs' bloody pursuit, Isaiah prophecies of weapons refashioned into gardening tools and arch enemies, lions and lambs peacefully coexisting steep this text

Today's text, written after decades of war, sets up a classic scenario of hope. From the battlefield, a messenger is sent to announce that victory has been won.

*Dear God, we come to hear of the peace your son brings to our time. Shine you light into these words that we too might bring them to life in our time and place. Amen.*

Isaiah 52:7-10

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the LORD to Zion. Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.

The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

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Isaiah's battlefield is not just any confrontation between two armies but the field of human history itself in which God is triumphant, redeeming Jerusalem and all people.

This text speaks of the Peace of God so long anticipated by Isaiah, when rulers and people embrace a way of life that worships God and neighbor. And yet, this war, begun eight centuries before the time of Christ's birth persisted, even as the names of the conquerors and invaders changed.

By the day of Jesus' birth, Caesar enforced the Pax Romana – the Peace of Rome – by varied instruments of death. Into this time of war, our Christmas story takes place, peace in the midst of conflict.

Pax Dei, the peace of God, grows from a carpenter's army, assembled from rag tag fishermen and tradesmen, yet able to subvert the systems of corruption, and oppression, discrimination, and terror.

That Peace of God remains possible today as we rise above the fray to worship God's son. This isn't some prophet's fancy.

During the war to end all wars, now numbered as the first world war, those fighting on the front lines experienced a collective reverence for Christ so powerful as to silence artillery. Despite denials by the generals and military officers of insubordination on both sides, the Times of London reported on a truce declared on Christmas Day. Letters penned by those on both sides, who laid down arms to exchange gifts, convey a story for us.

Imagine yourself in England, wondering if your son, or brother, or friend fighting in the trenches is alive. If he received your

small parcel. Put yourself in the place of the recipient of one of his letters home.

As Ed reads, listen for the organ introductions and join singing with the same spirit as those in 1914.

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Letter from the Western Front, Christmas Day 1914  
From a British Soldier

My Dear sister Janet,

It is 2:00 in the morning and most of our men are asleep in their dugouts—yet I could not sleep myself before writing to you of the wonderful events of Christmas Eve. In truth, what happened seems almost like a fairy tale, and if I hadn't been through it myself, I would scarce believe it. Just imagine: While you and the family sang carols before the fire there in London, I did the same with enemy soldiers here on the battlefields of France!

As I wrote before, there has been little serious fighting of late. The first battles of the war left so many dead that both sides have held back until replacements could come from home. So we have mostly stayed in our trenches and waited.

But what a terrible waiting it has been! Knowing that at any moment an artillery shell might land and explode beside us in the trench, killing or maiming several men. And in daylight not daring to lift our heads above ground, for fear of a sniper's bullet. And the rain—it has fallen almost daily.

Of course, it collects right in our trenches, where we must bail it out with pots and pans. And with the rain has come mud—a

good foot or more deep. It splatters and cakes everything, and constantly sucks at our boots.

Through all this we couldn't help feel curious about the German soldiers across the way. After all they faced the same dangers we did, and slogged about in the same muck. What's more, their first trench was only 50 yards from ours. Between us lay No Man's Land, bordered on both sides by barbed wire—yet they were close enough we sometimes heard their voices. Of course, we hated them when they killed our friends. But other times we joked about them and almost felt we had something in common. And now it seems they felt the same.

Just yesterday morning—Christmas Eve—we had our first good freeze. Cold as we were we welcomed it, because at least the mud froze

solid. Everything was tinged white with frost, while a bright sun shone over all. Perfect Christmas weather. During the day, there was little shelling or rifle fire from either side and as darkness fell on our Christmas Eve, the shooting stopped entirely. Our first complete silence in months! We'd been told the Germans might try and attack and catch us off guard.

I went to the dugout to rest and lying on my cot, I must have drifted asleep. All at once my friend John was shaking me awake, saying 'Come and see! See what the Germans are doing!' I grabbed my rifle, stumbled out into the trench and stuck my head cautiously above the sandbags. I never hope to see a stranger and more lovely sight. Clusters of tiny lights were shining all along the German line, left and right as far as the eye could see 'What is it?' I asked in bewilderment and John answered, 'Christmas trees!'



And so it was. The Germans had placed Christmas trees in front of their trenches, lit by candle or lantern like beacons of goodwill. And then we heard voices raised in song.

Stille nacht, heilige nacht...

The carol may not yet be familiar to us in Britain, but John knew it and translated: 'Silent night, holy night.' I've never heard one lovelier—or more meaningful, in that quiet, clear night, its dark softened by a first-quarter moon.

When the song finished, the men in our trenches applauded. Yes British soldiers applauding Germans! Then one of our own men started singing *The First Nowell* and we all joined in.

In truth we sounded not nearly as good as the Germans, with their fine harmonies. But they responded with enthusiastic applause of their own and then began another.

O Tannenbaun, o Tannenbaun ...

Then we replied.

O come all ye Faithful...

But this time they joined in singing the same words in Latin,

Adeste fideles...

British and German harmonizing across No Man's Land! I would have thought nothing could be more amazing—but what came next was more so.

'English, come over!' we heard one of them shout. 'You no shoot, we no shoot.'

Then in the trenches, we looked at each other in bewilderment. Then one of us shouted jokingly, 'You come over here.'

To our astonishment, we saw two figures rise from the trench, climb over their barbed wire and advance unprotected across No Man's Land.

One of them called, send officer to talk. I saw one of our men lift his rifle to the ready and no doubt others did the same—but our captain called out 'Hold your fire!' Then he climbed out and went to meet the Germans half way. We heard them talking and a few minutes later, the captain came back with a German cigar in his mouth!

'We've agreed there will be no shooting before midnight tomorrow,' he announced. 'But sentries are to remain on duty and the rest of you stay alert.'

Across the way we could make out groups of two or three men starting out of trenches and coming towards us. Then some of us were climbing out too and in minutes more there were in No Man's Land, over a hundred soldiers and officers of each side, shaking hands with men we'd been trying to kill just hours earlier!

Before long a bonfire was built and around it we mingled—British khaki and German grey. I must say the Germans were the better dressed, with fresh uniforms for the holiday. Only a couple of our men knew German, but more of the Germans knew English. I asked one of them why that was.

'Because many have worked in England!' he said. 'Before all this, I was a waiter at the Hotel Cecil. Perhaps I waited on your table!'

‘Perhaps you did!’ I said, laughing, He told me he had a girlfriend in London and that war had interrupted their plans for marriage. I told him,

‘Don’t worry. We’ll have you beat by Easter, then you can come back and marry the girl.’ He laughed at that.

Then he asked if I’d send her a postcard he’d give me later, and I promised I would. Another German had been a porter at Victoria Station. He showed me a picture of his family back in Munich. His eldest sister was so lovely, I said I should like to meet her someday. He beamed and said he would like that very much and gave name his family’s address. Even those who could not converse could still exchange gifts—our cigarettes for their cigars, our tea for their coffee, our corned beef for their sausage.

Badges and buttons from uniforms changed owners and one of our lads walked off with the infamous spiked helmet! I myself traded a jackknife for a leather equipment belt—a fine souvenir to show when I get home.

Newspapers too changed hands and the Germans howled with laughter at ours. They assured us that France was finished and Russia nearly beaten too. We told them that was nonsense and one of them said, ‘Well you believe your newspapers and we’ll believe ours.’ Clearly, they are lied to—yet after meeting these men, I wonder how truthful our newspapers have been. These are not the savage barbarians we’ve read so much about. They are men with homes and families, hopes and fears, principles and yes love of country. In other words, men like ourselves.

Why are we led to believe otherwise?

As it grew late, a few more songs were traded around the fire and then all joined in for—I'm not lying to you—'Auld Lang Syne.' Then we parted with promises to meet again tomorrow and even some talk of a football match. I was just starting back to the trench when an older German clutched my arm, 'My God,' he said 'why cannot we have peace and go home?' I told him gently, 'that you must ask you Emperor.' He looked at me then, searchingly, 'Perhaps, my friend. But also we must ask our hearts.'

And so dear sister, tell me, has there ever been such a Christmas Eve in all history? And what does it all mean, this impossible befriending of enemies? For the fighting here, of course, it means regrettably little.

Decent fellows those soldiers may be, but they follow orders and we do the same. Besides, we are here to stop their army and send it home and never could we shirk that duty.

Still, one cannot help imagine what would happen of the spirit shown here were caught by the nations of the world; Of course, disputes must always arise. But what if our leaders were to offer well wishes in place of warnings? Songs in place of slurs? Presents in place of reprisals? Would not all war end at once? All nations say they want peace. Yet on this Christmas morning, I wonder if we want it quite enough.

Your loving brother, Tom





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