

AN ARMISTICE IN HUMAN AFFAIRS

A sermon preached by the Rev. John Nichols to the First Parish in Wayland on
December 8, 2013

This morning I want to tell you two Christmas stories, both of them true. The first was originally told by Dr. Loren Eiseley, a famous scientist and author, about a Christmas when he had become depressed about growing older and about life in general. He tells it this way.

“I was tired of my own skin, of sterilized apartment living. I was tired of commercialized “people gifts”. I was tired of engraved cards proclaiming a season of good will as though it constituted a temporary armistice in human affairs. Nevertheless I went to the Christmas Eve party, and it was upon return from that party that I met the talking cat. Let us have no smiles. I was perfectly sober, so much so that I stood and debated what to do. There are hundreds of lost dogs and abandoned cats in the environs of great cities. Because of helplessness one steels oneself against many deplorable sights.

“As I stood on the grounds of my apartment house a thin snow was beginning to fall and there was a hint in the chill air of implacable winds and drifts before morning. It was just at that moment that I heard a plaintive cry from under the shrubbery near the door. The cry was that of cat in distress. I have heard many such cries in the course of my life under circumstances where I had been forced to walk on. “What could I do here,” I thought grimly, taking another step toward the door. All over the world there are starving homeless people and animals. Pictures from the past floated through my mind so that I hung my head in distress.

“I groped for the keys to the door, and it was only then that I realized these pains that afflicted me were the result of the eloquence of the unseen cat under the bush. He was not merely saying he was lost and complaining about it. With perfectly amazing eloquence he was going up and down the scales of animal grievance. If I could not completely make out the words I could comprehend their gist. This invisible cat was informing me about the nature of the world, of his deliberate abandonment, of his innocence of wrong, and of my duties as a human being. Why would I not respond to him? It was more than I could bear.

“Remember the regulations about pets’ protested my wife. ‘You’ve getting involved.’ ‘Not yet’ I answered. But I came down to the lawn and approached the bush murmuring some kind of guilty explanation to its still invisible occupant. Explanations of why I could do nothing, protests against his protests, explaining that I was not really heartless but that events ----

For a moment this dialogue continued. Then the voice in the shrubbery ceased. He won’t dare to come out, I thought. My conscience is clear. I’ve talked

to him. I've been decent, but there is no food in my pocket. I have explained – a silence hovered while the creature considered my obstinate protests and looked me over with nightwise eyes. Suddenly a small grey and white shadow appeared on the snow. The cat had made its decision. It ran directly to me and rolled over on its back in a gesture of trust. I dropped to my knees.

“... he made some further remarks about being cold and being hungry. I felt the dust of travel in his fur. He also talked about the dependency of cats on human kind. He retained faith (in us). I shuddered, but it was not in me to disillusion him. Besides I was sustaining the burden of our humanity at Christmas.”

“But the superintendent” protested my wife. “He won't stand for it.” “He will for a little while,” I muttered. “He's got to. We've got to find this cat a home.” And the cat slept that night with his head on his protector's pillow. Subsequent efforts to find an owner for the cat proved fruitless. The world is full of stray cats and unwanted kittens. As one week led to another the ever present fear that the superintendent would discover this cat mounted. Someone suggested the SPCA.

Eiseley remembers, “A strong compulsion took me. I loved this animal from the cold night. “If it becomes necessary,” I spoke my ultimatum to the room where we had lived for a quarter of a century, “If it becomes necessary we shall move, so help me. We won't desert him.”

At length a home was found with a former student of Eiseleys who also had a dog. As luck would have it the cat and the dog got along famously. And they even slept side by side in the dog house. Eiseley finishes his story with this comment. “He is walking through the world like a cat out of Eden. A Christmas cat. A cat who talks to each person once, just once. Now he has escaped the snow and is living in the house of a companionable great dog. Nothing, no one, has ever broken his trust, since he made his decision and came crying to me from the bush on Christmas Eve.

Where had I read about an old circus lion in Britain who had escaped from his cage? They had found him on the moors, bedded down with some sheep he had not harmed. It was the Christmas feel of kind, I thought, for the variegated life of the world across the boundaries of form, the thing so lost to most of us save for the confident talking cat and the lion and the wistful thinking of poets: for I love forms beyond my own and regret the borders between us.”

In the realm of religion there is theology and phenomenology. To make things very simple a theologian will try to tell you why you ought to celebrate Christmas. A phenomenologist will take a look at the ways in which we do celebrate and tell us why it works for us. Between the two of them I suspect I have always been more of a phenomenologist so I want to focus on why this seems to be important.

This story is an important contribution to that effort. Much of the year we live defensively. We lock our houses and our cars to prevent theft. We drive defensively to prevent accidents. We conduct ourselves cautiously in large groups in order to avoid embarrassment. We carefully measure out the time we spend in different areas of our life to prevent fatigue. We even hold our ideals defensively to prevent disillusionment and despair. We harden ourselves to the appeals of innumerable charities because we simply can not bleed constantly for a world in which there is constant suffering.

Christmas turns out to be an armistice in human affairs. It is a time when we drop some of our defenses and discover – with Loren Eiseley – that those qualities we think make us strong against the world are not the qualities that bring us joy. The qualities that bring us joy are found when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable to the world; able to care for a defenseless creature; able to receive the friendship of a stranger; able to make a gesture of goodwill that may or may not be returned.

One could be cynical. Many people are. This season of “good will” is so short and followed by a return to business as usual. Perhaps when the Millennium arrives, good will among all people will last forever, but until then we all need our suspicions and cautious defenses. There’s truth in that, but we also need this vital reminder that our defenses are not what make us happy.

The second story is one I’d heard for many years and thought was fiction until I researched it and found it to be true. In 1914, British, French and German troops faced each other from trenches across a barren landscape. Day after day they poured withering fire into each other’s fortifications. Periodically one side or the other would make a suicidal charge to take the other’s trench, and hundreds of bodies were left in the middle.

When they went off to war, all sides thought the war would be a slam dunk for their country. Each side believed it had the superior men and armaments and the superior rationale for fighting. As the deaths piled up the soldiers on each side began to question why they were there in the first place. And slowly they understood they were at the dawn of modern warfare, a warfare of attrition, from which no one would come home in glory or honor.

On Christmas Eve in 1914, the first year of the war, by no prearrangement, both lines fell silent. The British soldiers heard in the distance the sounds of “Silent Night” sung in German, and they responded with “God rest ye Merry Gentlemen.” The carols continued back and forth through the night, and in the morning, in one sector at least, a flag of truce appeared. Tentatively both sides gathered into the middle ground, into “No Man’s Land”, exchanging cigarettes for cigars, plum pudding for sausages. They even put together a soccer game. And as Christmas Day waned each retreated cautiously to the

shelter of their fortifications, everyone wondering who might fire the first shot. And, of course, eventually somebody did.

The same thing tried to happen on Christmas Eve of 1915, but by this time the news of what had happened had permeated back to London and Berlin. Good patriots on both sides, patriots back home who had not actually experienced the horror of battle were outraged at this fraternization with the enemy. Hence the commanding generals ruled that what had happened last Christmas was not to happen again, upon pain of death. The officer commanding those troops in 1914 was court martialed and sentenced to death. He was reprieved by a personal appeal to King George V.

The celebration of Christmas is the only thing other than victory or defeat that ever brought a cessation of hostilities in what was once called The Great War. Both sides worshipped the same God. Most worshipped the same Christ, but their common religion didn't seem to stop them from slaughtering one another. The genius of the Christmas Story, however is that it is not about a warring God or a victorious Christ.

It is about an old man and his young wife, who are forced by an alien occupying power to travel a distance at the peak of her pregnancy in order to be registered for taxation. It is about a child whose life was endangered the moment he was born. It is about the kind of man that child became despite having been born in such precarious circumstances.

The Christmas story is about tenderness and care, about family and friends, about traveling and going home. It is about all of those areas in our lives where we are touched and made vulnerable and reminded that it is not our weapons that make us happy, but what makes us happy is what enters our lives when our guard is down.

I remember the year I almost didn't allow that armistice to happen. I almost didn't celebrate Christmas. I was a young man, a young husband, a young father and a new minister in my second or third year of my first congregation. I can't remember specifically what was going on with me except that I was working too hard. I was carrying some grief I had been unable to acknowledge. I was at that point in ministry when I took every comment, criticism or complaint as a reflection on my capability not only as a minister but as a human being.

Whatever was going on I was in no mood for "Fa la la la la.. la ,la, la, la. It was bad enough, I thought, that I had to go through Christmas Eve with them, but to endure more of this caroling nonsense on the Sunday before Christmas was just unacceptable, and I convinced myself, theologically wrong.

This was one of those years when Sunday comes on the same day as Christmas Eve, and so I decided no more carols than necessary. On that

morning service we sung no Christmas carols, and I preached a sermon on how we must transcend the glitter of Christmas and remember that this was about a man who died in agony on the cross, because he was misunderstood. I think actually I was feeling misunderstood.

Well, I survived it with the help of an understanding board chair, a hurried round of personal diplomacy and a congregation that had grown used to forgiving the mistakes of young ministers. What I learned was that I had no right really to deprive my congregation of the break they desperately needed, the armistice in human affairs.

They were as aware as anyone could be of all the pains and trouble around them. They were far more aware than I of their own grief and sorrows and regret, aware as well of the pressures in their lives that seemed to erode their own humanity. I had no right to deprive them, or myself, of that truce that we all need from fighting the world.

Christmas functions as an armistice in human affairs, and you know what, the Unitarian Universalists made it that way! The American Christmas was shaped by a Brit, Charles Dickens, whose "Christmas Carol" was one of the first Christmas stories to express the ethical message of Jesus. It is a remarkable story for Ebenezer Scrooge is everyone at one time or another. He lives defensively, looking out for his own interests, taking care to avoid disillusionment by refusing to believe in anything he cannot lock in a vault. Only when his defenses are effectively penetrated by three ghosts does he realize that it is only by giving that he can receive. He wrote this book right after he joined a Unitarian chapel in London.

The message appealed tremendously to the Nineteenth Century Unitarians and Universalists. Their Protestant counter parts were saying what is important about Jesus is he will save us all from Satan's power. The Unitarians and Universalists said "No." Jesus, by his life and example, taught that we need not create a Hell on earth.

In 1849, Edmund Hamilton Sears, a Unitarian minister, once of this church, wrote "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" the first carol ever to apply Jesus teachings to human events through the words, "Peace on earth, good will to men". During the lowest ebb of the Civil War Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote, "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! And in despair I bowed my head; there is on 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."

John Bowering wrote "Watchman Tell us of the Night". James Russell Lowell also wrote carols and, in fact, any inclusive carol hymnal will find 30% of the carols written by members of our small movement. It was Unitarian minister Charles Follen who brought the Christmas Tree to New England and a Universalist wrote jingle bells.

These days coming up are our Holy Days because we do see them as an armistice in human affairs. It is a time when we let go for a time of the bellicosity and defensiveness that separates us from one another. It is a time when we remember that we are all travelers with Joseph and Mary. We all have families, and we know what it is like to be out there in the cold and dark without someone who cares. It is a time we remember the hope of peace and the child, become man who died to make it real.

In the early Seventies, at the height of the Vietnam conflict, Simon and Garfunkle recorded a song which began with the soft singing of "Silent Night." As the song progressed we heard with increasing volume the sounds of the six o clock news, broadcasting the world's most recent battlefield casualties. The news got louder and worse but the singing of "Silent Night" is never entirely stilled, and at the end of the recording that's all we hear. So be it. I hope you will enjoy your armistice.