

Finding Peace within the Rush
Rev. Kathleen Owens
Dec. 5, 6, 2009

First this poem by Charles Simic, titled War.

The trembling finger of a woman
Goes down the list of casualties
On the evening of the first snow.

The house is cold and the list is long.

All our names are included.

We are in our second year of using our monthly transformational themes in our worship and program life here at the church. This December our theme is peace. And several months ago I submitted the title of this sermon – “Finding Peace within the Rush” – thinking I would preach about the inevitable that seems to happen every year at this time. Our already busy lives become even busier with holiday events to plan, prepare for and attend etc. It happens to many of us in our personal lives and in our institutions. Even here we have a long list of activities and events to highlight the month’s many holidays. The list of happenings at First Church was sent out as an email blast, is on our website and specific dates of events can be found in our calendar in the Window. Even in this service we have many wonderful elements – chock full of presents. When I submitted the title, I was going to explore the idea of finding peace within this rush – within the busyness of the season... and an issue with advance planning is that life can sometimes intercede. And it has – so this sermon has taken a different turn. It’s a different turn for I feel the need to respond to the news of more troops, of sending more of our sons and daughters, mothers and fathers into harm’s way, into Afghanistan once again. And reflecting on the core lesson, the central point of the previous sermon I’m not delivering, the central point in both is the same. Only the definition of what “the rush” is has changed.

Christmas Truce – 1914

The Christmas Truce

By Aaron Shepard

(This first section was read by Suzette. The various soldiers were read by Les GrantSmith, Scott GrantSmith, Roy Attridge, and Jeffery Cox).

PREVIEW: On a Christmas Eve of World War I, British and German soldiers lay down their weapons to celebrate the holiday together.

DIRECTOR: The Christmas Truce of 1914 is one of the most remarkable incidents of World War I and perhaps of all military history. Starting in some places on Christmas Eve and in others on Christmas Day, the truce covered as much as two-thirds of the British-German front, with thousands of soldiers taking part. Perhaps most remarkably, it grew out of no single initiative but sprang up in each place spontaneously and independently. Nearly everything described here is drawn from first-hand accounts in letters and diaries of the time.

SOLDIER 1: *(to audience)* Christmas Day, 1914. Dear mother,

SOLDIER 4: *(to audience)* My darling Meg,

SOLDIER 2: *(to audience)* My good friend Charles,

SOLDIER 3: *(to audience)* My dear sister Janet,

SOLDIER 1: It is 2:00 in the morning and most of our men are asleep in their dugouts.

SOLDIER 4: Yet I could not sleep myself before writing to you of the wonderful events of Christmas Eve.

SOLDIER 2: In truth, what happened seems almost like a fairy tale, and if I hadn't been through it myself, I would scarce believe it.

SOLDIER 3: 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!

SOLDIER 1: 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.

SOLDIER 4: But what a terrible waiting it has been! Knowing that 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.

SOLDIER 2: 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.

SOLDIER 3: It splatters and cakes everything, and constantly sucks at our boots. One new recruit got his feet stuck in it, and then his hands too when he tried to get out—just like in that American story of the tar baby!

SOLDIER 1: Through all this, we couldn't help feeling curious about the German soldiers across the way. After all, they faced the same dangers we did, and slogged about in the same muck.

SOLDIER 4: 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.

SOLDIER 2: Of course, we hated them whenever they killed our friends. But other times, we joked about them and almost felt we had something in common.

SOLDIER 3: And now it seems they felt the same.

SOLDIER 1: Just yesterday morning—Christmas Eve Day—we had our first good freeze. Cold as we were, we welcomed it, because at least the mud froze solid.

SOLDIER 4: Everything was tinged white with frost, while a bright sun shone over all. Perfect Christmas weather.

SOLDIER 2: 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.

SOLDIER 3: Our first complete silence in months! We hoped it might promise a peaceful holiday, but we didn't count on it. We'd been told the Germans might attack and try to catch us off guard.

SOLDIER 1: I went to the dugout to rest, and lying on my cot, I must have drifted asleep. All at once my friend 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.

SOLDIER 4: 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.

SOLDIER 2: "What is it?" I asked in bewilderment, and someone answered, "Christmas trees!"

SOLDIER 3: And so it was. The Germans had placed Christmas trees in front of their trenches, lit by candle or lantern like beacons of good will.

SOLDIER 1: And then we heard their voices raised in song. (*singing*) "Stille nacht, heilige nacht"

SOLDIER 4: This carol may not yet be familiar to us in Britain, but one soldier 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.

SOLDIER 2: When the song finished, the men in our trenches applauded. Yes, British soldiers applauding Germans!

SOLDIER 3: Then one of our own men started singing, and we all joined in. (*singing*) “The first Nowell, the angel did say”

SOLDIER 1: 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. (*singing*) “O Tannenbaum, o Tannenbaum”

SOLDIER 4: Then we replied. (*singing*) “O come all ye faithful”

SOLDIER 2: But this time they joined in, singing the same words in Latin. (*singing*) “Adeste fideles”

SOLDIER 3: 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.

SOLDIER 1: “English, come over!” we heard one of them shout. “You no shoot, we no shoot.”

SOLDIER 4: There in the trenches, we looked at each other in bewilderment. Then one of us shouted jokingly, “You come over here.”

SOLDIER 2: To our astonishment, we saw two figures rise from the trench, climb over their barbed wire, and advance unprotected across No Man’s Land.

SOLDIER 3: One of them called, “Send officer to talk.”

SOLDIER 1: 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 halfway.

SOLDIER 4: 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.”

SOLDIER 2: Across the way, we could make out groups of two or three men starting out of trenches and coming toward us.

SOLDIER 3: Then some of us were climbing out too, and in minutes more, there we 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!

SOLDIER 1: 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.

SOLDIER 4: 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.

SOLDIER 2: One German told me he had a girlfriend in London and that the 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.

SOLDIER 3: 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 me his family's address.

SOLDIER 1: 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!

SOLDIER 4: I myself traded a jackknife for a leather equipment belt—a fine souvenir to show when I get home.

SOLDIER 2: Newspapers too changed hands, and the Germans howled with laughter at ours. They assured us that France was finished and Russia nearly beaten too.

SOLDIER 3: We told them that was nonsense, and one of them said, “Well, you believe your newspapers and we’ll believe ours.”

SOLDIER 1: Clearly they are lied to—yet after meeting these men, I wonder how truthful our own newspapers have been.

SOLDIER 4: 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.

SOLDIER 2: In other words, men like ourselves.

SOLDIER 3: Why are we led to believe otherwise?

SOLDIER 1: As it grew late, a few more songs were traded around the fire, and then all joined in for—I am not lying to you—“Auld Lang Syne.”

SOLDIER 4: Then we parted with promises to meet again tomorrow,

SOLDIER 2: and even some talk of a football match.

SOLDIER 3: I was just starting back to the trenches when an older German clutched my arm.

“My God,” he said, “why cannot we have peace and all go home?”

I told him gently, “That you must ask your emperor.”

He looked at me then, searchingly. “Perhaps, my friend. But also we must ask our hearts.”

SOLDIER 1: And so, dear mother,

SOLDIER 4: dear wife,

SOLDIER 2: dear friend,

SOLDIER 3: dear sister,

SOLDIER 1: tell me, has there ever been such a Christmas Eve in all history?

SOLDIER 4: And what does it all mean, this impossible befriending of enemies?

SOLDIER 2: 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.

SOLDIER 3: Besides, we are here to stop their army and send it home, and never could we shirk that duty.

SOLDIER 1: Still, one cannot help imagine what would happen if the spirit shown here were caught by the nations of the world.

SOLDIER 4: Of course, disputes must always arise.

SOLDIER 2: But what if our leaders were to offer well wishes in place of warnings?

SOLDIER 3: Songs in place of slurs?

SOLDIER 1: Presents in place of reprisals?

SOLDIER 4: Would not all war end at once?

SOLDIER 2: All nations say they want peace.

SOLDIER 3: Yet on this Christmas morning, I wonder if we want it quite enough.

SOLDIER 1: Yours truly,

SOLDIER 4: Yours always,

SOLDIER 2: Sincerely,

SOLDIER 3: With all my love,

SOLDIER 1: John

SOLDIER 4: Andrew

SOLDIER 2: Philip

SOLDIER 3: Tom

-end-

We rush in...with military might – rush in to try and fix, uncertain of our ability, the terrain or if we can build alliances. We rush in with a possible exit date in place, as long as we succeed – but what does success look like? But what if...what if we just stopped? It's an easy question to ask – it's easy to say that is the answer – that it's up to the soldiers to just not fight. But saying that, we put the burden of systematic change onto military personnel, esp. the front line people as if they just stop, all will be well. It's more complicated than that, for the multiple reasons we have a military (poverty and the promise to get out of it, the promise of education, needed structure for some, to name but a few) not to mention the humanitarian work that our service members do – it gets complicated and I don't know about you, but when I try to think about it too much – my head, my heart, my soul literally begins to ache and it all feels like too much, it's too big. How do we talk about, promote peace when our country is in the rush of war...when it seems to never end – all in the name of what? Ending terrorism?

There is a way – Lao-Tse says sages never try to do big things. Remember in 2003, when thousands organized and marched to stop wars...it was impressive, it was magical, it felt possible and yet we still went to war...and continue to go. Why? Because of the economics, the fear, the hate, the business it produces, the inventions created, because...too many reasons to list. So what if we were to stop – to stop trying to do the big things and instead focused on the little ones – the things we can do, beginning with ourselves because really, it's the only thing we have control over, ourselves. Like what if I stopped my need to be right? What if I stopped my tongue before blurting out a sarcastic comment? Like stopping my attitude of defensiveness with my

friend? I've been told that defensiveness is the first act of war – when I'm defensive, my heart closes up and my ability to listen shuts down. What if I stopped and instead – took a breath, I mean literally and then questioned my thought that I need to defend myself because I felt verbally attacked? What if I chose to instead find a way to peace within my own heart. I have stopped other things before...I used to eat ice cream every day but began to feel its effects – not so good; now I limit myself to once a week, for the most part and it wasn't hard. I have stopped myself from old habits of thinking and while I slip back occasionally, it's become more of a habit.

Finding peace within the rush – whether the rush is war...or the holiday season that is too full of events...finding peace can start simply by stopping ourselves from old habits and breathing, questioning and being open to a different point of view. Finding peace is a healing act – perhaps the best form of self preservation I know.

It's an old story. The country was at war. The people were terrified, and had fled to the hills in the face of the advancing enemy troops. By the time the army arrived, the place was deserted. The fierce-looking barbarian of a general called his troops together. 'Where has everyone gone?' he demanded, raging. 'They have all fled in fear of us,' the men replied. 'Is there no one left to pay tribute? No citizens that we can force into slavery? No one to terrorize, and no treasure to plunder?' The general's rage knew no bounds. 'As far as we can discover, the only living person here for miles around is an old holy man living in a hermitage just outside the village.' Without any more ado, the general marched to the hermitage and demanded to see the holy man. After a search, he found him quietly meditating. The general was furious that the holy man refused to acknowledge him as conqueror. He shouted at the holy man: 'Don't you know who I am? You are looking at the man who could strike you dead without batting an eyelid!' The

holy man raised his eyes and fixed his gaze steadily on the raging commander. ‘Don’t you know,’ he asked calmly, ‘that you are looking at a man who can be struck dead without batting an eyelid?’ For a moment the general was speechless, fixed by the cool gaze of the holy man. Then he bowed low, called his troops together, and left the village without doing any further damage.¹

What if we lived in that place? Tempting...tempting to become a monk or nun, to live on the outskirts...with time spent in meditation. Some do – it is their calling but most of us don’t – we have a different path. But we can stop all that distracts and creates confusion and suffering in our lives – suffering because of our ego, our defensiveness and learn instead to live in a state of peace – within ourselves first. If we can live at peace within our own hearts – to speak the truth in love and really mean it; if we could listen to one another without our defenses or our need to be right; we could stop the war within our own hearts and then, as the Dao states, if peace exists within our own hearts, then there can be peace within our homes, which ripples out to our neighborhoods and into our cities. From our cities peace would overflow into our nations and then flood the world.²

But how do we do this? I urgently commend to you, for you who are serious about this – I commend to you John Paul Lederach’s book, The Moral Imagination: the Art and Soul of Building Peace. In this book he asks the question: “How do we transcend the cycles of violence that bewitch our human community while still living in them?” His answer is through building the moral imagination of people. He writes, “the moral imagination requires the capacity to imagine ourselves in a web of relationships that include our enemies; the ability to sustain a paradoxical curiosity that embraces complexity without reliance on dualistic polarity; the

¹ “Confrontation” from One Hundred Wisdom Stories, edited by Margaret Silf

² “If there is to be peace” reading #602 from Singing the Living Tradition

fundamental belief in and pursuit of the creative act; and the acceptance of the inherent risk of stepping into the mystery of the unknown that lies beyond the far too familiar landscape of violence.”³ I think we Unitarian Universalists, we who are already aware of the interdependent web of life, we who live in community together with others with various views and understandings of the sacred – we are not afraid of complexity, we who are creative and acknowledge the need for the arts and beauty; we are prime candidates for this creation and the building of this work. It is sacred work...requiring much more strength, honor, integrity and discipline than the easy slide into violence. And it is an easy slide. The violence starts so small, doesn't it? It begins so easily in our own minds, our defenses go up, bitter words are spoken rather than taking the time to acknowledge the pain or hurt and find ways to repair; it's much easier to spew forth, act out than hold still, breathe, think and question with an open heart. “The moral imagination believes and acts on the basis that the unexpected is possible. It operates with the view that the creative act is always within human potential, but creativity requires moving beyond the parameters of what is visible, what currently exists, or what is taken as given. The moral imagination does not just think outside the box; it is willing to take the risk to live outside the box.”⁴

Great sages don't try to do big things – they do the small things. We can start where we are, choosing one thing – that creates more peace in our own lives and thus into the rest of the world. We can build relationships that include everyone, we can touch the heart of complexity, living creativity and risk the unknown. If we do not, then who? If not now, how long can the world wait? The trembling finger of a woman goes down the list of casualties...all our names are

³ Pages 4 and 5.

⁴ Ibid, page 62.

included. As we do for ourselves, we do for the world. Let us choose peace – starting here (points to own heart), and here (congregation) now. Amen.