

The Songs of Christmas

ADVENT: Day 23

"I HEARD THE BELLS ON CHRISTMAS DAY"

*I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
In music sweet the tones repeat
There's peace on earth, good will to men!*

*I thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along th' unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good will to men!*

Every Christmas is a "first Christmas" for some people.

The first Christmas spent alone because of health problems or work responsibilities.

The first Christmas after a divorce.

The first Christmas after a loved one has died.

While we ought always to remember that others might be suffering even if they don't show it on the outside, remembering this fact may be even more crucial at Christmastime, when all seems "merry and bright"—except for those souls enduring a lonely, hard, and depressing "first Christmas."

Knowing the origin story of "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" may help you, or those you love, through such "first Christmases."

The story behind the song

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote the poem "Christmas Bells" in 1863 during an incredibly difficult time of his life.

In 1861, Longfellow's wife, Frances, died in a tragic accident. She'd been sealing envelopes with hot wax when a flame caught her clothes on fire. Longfellow rushed to save her by smothering the flames but was badly burned in the process. His wife did not recover, and Longfellow was too badly burned to attend her funeral.

In 1863, the poet was once again grieved when his son, Charley, chose to enlist and fight in the Civil War—against his father's wishes. A few months later, Charley was shot, the bullet nicking his spine.

Longfellow went to Washington and retrieved his son from the hospital. They arrived home on December 8, and Longfellow began the long process of nursing his son back to health.

When Longfellow wrote "Christmas Bells," he'd suffered loss and grief, but he had been greatly comforted when he heard the church bells that rang on Christmas Day. Longfellow's poem was set to music in 1872, and "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" is still a song of hope and comfort to people today.

Who needs his peace today?

Do you know someone who is sad or lonely this year? Someone experiencing that kind of "first Christmas" no one wants to experience?

We experience a gamut of emotions throughout life, from joy to sorrow and everything in between. As has been often said, "The only constant is change." But there is a certain comfort in the things of life that do not change.

Longfellow heard the bells ringing out that sad day, but the familiar sounds comforted him. Those bells rang with the same music he'd heard during the happier moments of his life.

He was reminded of their "unbroken song" that connected him to other people in other places, and yet all of them shared the same Christmas story of "peace on earth, good will to men."

Whom do you know that needs that story of peace today?

"The Songs Tell the Story"
An Advent Devotional By: Janet Denison