

A Christmas Letter to Christians in the Military

December 28, 2005

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, who serve in the armed forces of our nation,

These Christmas greetings come to you after December 25, and for that I apologize; however, those in the military are likely accustomed to such delays. “Hurry up and wait” strikes again.

Christmas is now past for another year, and passed by in peace within the United States. No doubt, across our nation on December 24-5, weary preachers trotted out the old Christmas cease-fire story from December, 1914. I’ve heard it before, perhaps you have too, how enemy troops stopped shooting in Flanders and elsewhere on the Western Front. German and British soldiers exchanged gifts and stood arm in arm to celebrate the birth of Christ. Usually, at this point, the preacher uses this as an example of “peace on earth, goodwill toward men,” and wonders why it just isn’t like that anymore.

Such preachers generally neglect to mention that the cease-fire ended shortly after December 25, that life returned to machined guns and mustard gas, that millions died in the course of the war, that the U.S. would enter late but still suffer over 57,000 fatalities...and that the Christmas truce was never repeated, though the war didn’t cease until 1919. Of all modern warfare, I know of no other conflict that cost so much and contributed so little.

I suppose that, in a way, the Christmas truce of 1914 truly is an exceptional example of “peace on earth and goodwill toward men”—when engineered by mankind. It doesn’t last. Evil doesn’t go away with a Christmas carol and cigar exchange. Those of you who served in Bosnia or Mogadishu know only too well: “peace-keeping missions” are hardly peaceful, because only an awful lot of firepower keeps the peace between sinful men. The good guys have to carry guns, too. Big guns. Remove the threat of superior firepower, and war will resume in no time.

This is what makes your vocation a necessary one. In a sinful world, peace is kept by threat and force. Sin must be curbed. Those who try to fight evil with overtures of appeasement will find themselves on the losing end. Remember Sean Connery’s line in “The Untouchables?” To a naïve Elliot Ness, he explained how to fight Al Capone, something like: “He pulls a knife, you pull a gun. He sends one of yours to the hospital, you send one of his to the morgue. That’s the Chicago way.” Like it or not, that is how evil is suppressed in our world, by those who are good exercising superior force and risking greater sacrifice.

This is something that you understand far better than most, especially if you have served on the front line of conflict. Please accept my thanks for your service to our nation.

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At least in WWI, some chivalry remained between enemies in some theaters; today, there is nothing noble about an IED. Exposure to that sort of threat, day in and day out, can lead to fatigue, depression, even despair.

Rather than the Christmas truce of 1914, I think that a passage from Jeff Shaara’s novel, *To the Last Man*, gives more insight into religion in the trenches. After his first day of fighting at Belleau

Wood, U.S. Marine Roscoe Temple reflects on his sergeant's instructions to recover food and water from the dead of the battlefield:

"But the idea of digging into a dead man's pockets, or drinking the dead man's water, was a horror of another kind, born of some childish fear of disturbing the dead, the defiling of the sacred. He argued with himself, thought of Dugan, knew the old sergeant would have dismissed his hesitation with a profane laugh. If you're starving, and the man has food...well, perhaps tomorrow. By then, whether or not you defile anything may not matter. *In this place, it's hard to find the presence of God anywhere.* He thought of Parker. No, he would disagree. He would see God's hand in all of this, the punishment of the sinful. My mother would feel the same way. Who in these damned woods is not a sinner? How many men did I kill today? His mind froze at the question. Stop it, Roscoe. If you didn't kill them, then you would be dead now, someone would be going through your pockets, a German perhaps, and he wouldn't be waging this stupid argument with himself." (Shaara, Jeff. *To the Last Man*. Random House, 2004. Chapter 34, p. 738)

Where is God on the battlefield? Amid carnage and death, it's easy to believe that God is either angry or absent, that He isn't there or doesn't care. And, I would submit to you, that the front line is as close to hell as a human being can experience in this world: it's a place of chaos and violence, pain and death. In the middle of the battle, rules falter with formations, order often vanishes and the prospect of dying is very real. It appears as if God has simply withdrawn and left sinful human beings to work things out for themselves until the last man no longer stands. That's a pretty good illustration of hell, in my opinion, with two important differences. For one thing, all wars eventually cease; hell does not. For another—and this is far more important, the Lord only *appears* to be absent.

The Lord is present where He promises to be, where His Word is taught in its truth and purity, and where the Sacraments are administered according to His Word. See the Lord's Supper, sitting on the "altar" of crates covered by a cloth in the middle of the desert? There is Jesus, giving you his body and blood. See the new specialist being baptized? (I don't laugh at such, for people desire baptism when they understand the reality of death.) The Lord is there, joining him to His death and resurrection. Do you hear His Word? Then you hear Jesus speaking to you: "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Mt. 28:20).

Remember: faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things *not seen* (Heb. 11:1). The cross did not look like victory over sin and death for your redemption: it looked like a criminal undergoing execution. Faith sees differently: it sees the Son of God crucified for the sins of the world. Crucified for you. Likewise, no matter the violence your eyes witness, faith "sees" by God's Word. It hears, "I forgive you all of your sins." It hears, "I baptize you." It hears, "This is My body, this is My blood...for the forgiveness of sins." And it says, "There He is! My Savior is here with me!"

The hell of the battlefield will lead many to believe that God has exited the scene. By faith, you know better: despite man's evil and violence, the Lord faithfully remains with His people.

The Lord faithfully remains with you. And so you go about your duties with a comfort and assurance that no others can have.

On a rolling country road just outside of Colecamp, Missouri, you'll find St. John Lutheran Church and the congregation's cemetery. Generations of families are buried there, and three of the headstones mark the graves of Walter, Louise and Mathilde Kaiser. The story goes like this.

When the United States finally entered World War I, Walter was drafted into the army. It's my understanding that his parents were less than pleased, certainly worried at the thought of their son thrown into the trenches against the dreaded Hun. Nevertheless, Walter went off to war. Back home in Colecamp, the parents prayed and held their daughters close.

The war ended with an armistice that would go on to haunt Europe for generations. American troops returned home; and among them was Walter. (Though I never met him, I give thanks to God for his safe return: Walter married and became the father of Norbert. Norbert, after a stint in Korea on Pork Chop Hill, married and became the father of Teresa. Teresa and I were married in 1992.) When he reached Colecamp, one of his first stops was the cemetery—and the graves of Louise and Mathilde, his sisters. Safe from the war in the Ozarks, they died a day apart from influenza during the great pandemic of 1918.

I suppose some will see this story as a bitter irony and accuse the Lord of a cruel sense of humor, but that is not the point. Nor do I seek to see you take unnecessary risks while whistling, "Don't worry, be happy." Rather, it is the Lord that numbers our days, and it is He who has plans for you. It is not given to us to determine the days of our lives nor the manner of our death, but rather to live in thanksgiving to God for all of His blessings, and to serve in whatever callings God has given to us. I do not make light of the danger of your duties, and you are to be commended for your courage. But beyond that, I give thanks for the Lord's promise of salvation for you. Of the Kaiser family in the World War I generation, some had far longer lives than others: but all of them were baptized, and "he who believes and is baptized shall be saved" (Mk. 16:16).

In our present time, the media thrives on drama. If it is to be believed, our two greatest threats are war and the bird flu, the first possible serious pandemic since 1918. Much has changed since World War I, and much remains the same. In hostile areas of Iraq and Afghanistan, death is very evident; yet I may die today while you live to see great-grandchildren. For here is what is most certainly true for you, whether this finds you near Colecamp at Whiteman AFB or on foot patrol in Fallujah: you are the Lord's, and He has made you His beloved child. He gave His Son to take on the vulnerable human flesh that you and I share, in order to sacrifice Himself in service to you and me. His gifts of forgiveness and faith are free, and with them comes the certain promise of everlasting life. Whether we live or die this day, we are the Lord's (cf Ro. 14:8).

And if we are the Lord's, we have life in Him forever.

You remain in the prayers of the people of God. A blessed, if belated, Christmas to you.

Pastor Tim Pauls
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Boise, Idaho.