

## **I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day – the first Sunday of Advent 2022**

1. This is the first Sunday of Advent. For those in traditions that do not celebrate the liturgical year, the word “Advent” means an arrival, a breaking into and there has never been an advent like the one that occurred in Bethlehem of Judea just over 2000 years ago.
2. When a story is told again and again, our brains can start skipping parts, knowing how it ends. Ministers, teachers, and parents can struggle to find new ways to make the story powerful and keep their audience’s attention.
3. Today, we will take this time to recenter ourselves and take a look at the story through the eyes of those who hear the bells and see the lights...and wonder if the story is for them. To help us, we are going to look through the eyes of one of the greatest poets in American history, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.
4. The poet sat down at his desk and despaired. The year was 1863. Americans were slaughtering each other in numbers that wouldn’t be matched again in human history until the lights went out in Europe and civilization descended into trench warfare in World War One.
5. Longfellow had suffered so much even before the war came. Henry and his wife were barely in their 20s when she passed away after a miscarriage. Years later, he fell in love with Frances Appleton and, after 7yrs of courtship, they married. It was considered by all as a very happy marriage. The couple was devoted to each other and it looked like, after that first loss, that Longfellow was set for a happy life. They would have six children together.
6. And then...his wife’s dress caught fire when a candle fell on it. She died from her burns. Two years later, and still in mourning, Longfellow watched as his nation split in two and brothers killed their brothers as their widows and children starved to death...
7. Making it even worse was that his oldest son, Charles Appleton Longfellow, had joined the army against his father’s wishes and without his blessing. Longfellow learned about his son’s enlistment by

letter. Eight months later, in November of 1863, his son was severely wounded in the Battle of Mine Run. He lived, but was crippled by that injury the rest of his life.

8. We now return to the scene. Longfellow has sat at his desk. It is two years since the horrible accident that took his wife's life, one month since his son was grievously wounded in war...a war that seemed to have no end in sight.
9. And then...the bells began to ring. Christmas Bells. From his heart flowed a song that we know as "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day." (lyrics at the end of these notes)
10. Remember: this is an Advent sermon, not a music history lesson. You see, Longfellow was speaking for me and for many, many of you when he wrote these words. Our Christmas Eve service will be a different kind of service. Today is a bit of a commercial for that service but it is also a chance for us to speak openly about pain and loss in the midst of Advent celebrations.
11. Hear me: God sees you. God hears you. Advent is all about you. The comfortable, well fed, people with secure futures weren't looking for Jesus. It was those who needed a miracle, the impossible, that Jesus came.
12. God knows it is hard down here – but it's okay to remind Him. We have an entire book in the Bible called Lamentations. Our songbook, and the main theological and musical tome of the day when Jesus lived, is the Book of Psalms and over one third of those are laments. We have the story of Jeremiah and Job...and more.
13. Something is broken. Something is wrong. Paul said that all of creation moaned as if in childbirth. Childbirth – a time of celebration that is accompanied by pain, worry, and distress. No wonder that Jesus took this time to come in the flesh and to come as a baby. His Advent was like ours in that all of us arrive on this planet as the result of the dreams and actions of others.
14. Once here, we have to find our way to faith across broken ground. And we are not alone; others are making the same journey

you are making right now. We have people in our in person and online fellowship who are facing cancer, the illness or loss of their parents or children, and those who are in harm's way on battlefields or the sea. Longfellow had the words, but all of us know the tune because it has played in our hearts.

15. It is a tune that God knows, too. That is why Advent wasn't like a Marvel Comics movie. This was not the arrival of a Superman. No...this was a suffering servant. (Isaiah 53)
16. Jesus was and did all of this. He was not known for his good looks or charisma like Absalom. He wasn't known for his cunning and bravado in battle like David. He chose others, like him, that the world ignored or mistreated, threw away. And he promised heaven.
17. He came to tell us of God's love and that God would write the final chapter of our story. Resolution may not come during your lifetime. The pieces may not fall into place like a spiritual version of Tetris. Justice might not be seen to be done. Good people will die and evil people will prosper...
18. But the bells of Christmas still ring because the promise is real. Jesus came here and he went through it all just like you are right now. In his last moments on the cross he even felt deserted by God...but commended his soul into his Father's hands. In the Garden, he said "Nevertheless, not my will, but Thine be Done" and that made all the difference.
19. To all of you who are excited about Christmas, I am, too! For all of you who are hurting physically, mentally or spiritually...I am, too. I can say that openly because my salvation and the good news of Advent isn't dependent on me having a good day or complete and perfect faith: it is the story the bells tell – a cosmic warping childbirth, tears that turn to joy, light in the darkness as a star centers over the place where the suffering servant...and the savior of the world...is born.
20. (Patrick leads the carol, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" and speaks about the lack of resolution in the song and in our lives...for now)