

Five months into World War I, Charles Brewer never expected to be spending Christmas Eve nearly knee-deep in the mud of northern France. Stationed on the front lines, the 19-year-old British lieutenant with the Bedfordshire Regiment of the 2nd Battalion shivered in a trench with his fellow soldiers. After Great Britain entered in August 1914, many of them had expected that they would make quick work of the enemy and be home in time for Christmas. Nearly five months and 1 million lives later, however, the Great War had bogged down in intractable trench warfare with no end in sight.

Although disappointed to be far from home on Christmas Eve, Brewer was at least glad that the perpetual rain, which made moving through the trenches as much of a slog as the war itself, had finally abated on the moonlit night. It was eerily quiet on the Western Front when a British sentry suddenly spied a glistening light on the German parapet, less than 100 yards away. Warned that it might be a trap, Brewer slowly raised his head over the soaked sandbags protecting his position and through the maze of barbed wire saw a sparkling Christmas tree. As the lieutenant gazed down the line of the German trenches, a whole string of small trees glimmered like beads on a necklace.

Brewer then noticed the rising of a faint sound that he had never before heard on the battlefield—a Christmas carol. The German words to “Stille Nacht” were not familiar, but the tune—“Silent Night”—certainly was. When the German soldiers finished singing, their foes broke out in cheers. Used to returning fire, the British now replied in song with the English version of the carol.

When dawn broke on Christmas morning, something even more remarkable happened. In sporadic pockets along the 500-mile Western Front, unarmed German and Allied soldiers tentatively emerged from the trenches and cautiously crossed no-man’s-land—the killing fields between the trenches littered with frozen corpses, eviscerated trees and deep craters—to wish each other a Merry Christmas. Political leaders had ignored the call of Pope Benedict XV to cease fighting around Christmas, but soldiers in the trenches decided to stage their own unofficial, spontaneous armistices anyway.

Far from an organized, top-down ceasefire, the Christmas Truce instead was a series of small armistices that bubbled up from the men in the foxholes deciding to fraternize with the enemy. “We shook hands, wished each other a Merry Xmas and were soon conversing as if we had known each other for years,” British Corporal John Ferguson wrote of the encounter between his Seaforth Highlanders and German forces. “Here we were laughing and chatting to men whom only a few hours before we were trying to kill!”

The soldiers exchanged makeshift gifts such as cigarettes, chocolates, sausages, liquor and plum puddings and likely swapped stories about the miseries of war. German soldiers in even rolled barrels of beer they had seized from a nearby brewery across no-man’s-land to the British trenches where they raised toasts to one another’s health and united in agreement that “French beer was rotten stuff.”

In some cases, the strip of death between the trenches even came alive with pick-up soccer games as soldiers navigated around the shell craters and barbed wire in no-man’s-land. Where soldiers lacked a real leather ball to kick with their waterlogged boots, tin cans and small sandbags worked just as well.

But the unsanctioned truce concerned high-ranking officials, afraid that their men might lose the will to fight, and outraged others, including one young German corporal who would launch the next world war. “Such a thing should not happen in wartime,” Adolf Hitler scolded his fellow soldiers. “Have you no German sense of honor left?”

So, as the sun set on Christmas, the fighters retreated to their respective trenches. At 8:30 a.m. in one area of the long line of trenches, Captain Charles Stockwell of the 2nd Royal Welch Fusiliers fired three shots into the air and raised a flag that read “Merry Christmas.” His German counterpart raised a flag that read “Thank you.” The two men then mounted the parapets, saluted each other and returned to their sodden trenches. Stockwell wrote that his counterpart then “fired two shots in the air—and the war was on again.”

In our lesson from Acts today, the disciples are with Jesus for his last time here on Earth. And as they watch him ascend into heaven, it's as if they have already forgotten his last words to them that he spoke just seconds before: “Don't be afraid, I'm sending the Holy Spirit to comfort you and guide you and to be with you always.”

They keep watching him ascend, maybe out of honor and duty, wanting to keep looking until he disappears completely, maybe hoping for that joyous moment when he might change his mind and come back, maybe not wanting to look around at a world without Jesus in it. But they keep looking up, until two angels scold them, “Why do you keep looking up? This is your world now. Jesus will come back, yes, but until then, you have work to do. A lot of work.”

Seems we still have a lot of work to do. So often we take our eye off the ball, and things get out of hand. For those who have fought in wars, both those from our own land and those around the world, I have a feeling that each of those soldiers and sailors would think the world would be a whole lot better off if we all just spent a little more time looking up in the sky, looking for Jesus.

I've been reading a lot of things on World War I lately, and what interests me most is the poetry. At the start of the war, these poems were heroic odes written by those staying behind as they sent the boys off to a quick adventure. But the poems coming from the trenches, like Wilfred Owen's “Dulce et Decorum Est” belie the adventure and paint a grim, horrible picture of war at it's very, very worst. . . watching a comrade dying from a poison gas attack. But Owen fought on, with his fellow soldiers from England, and France, and America, and even Germany, he fought on. Trying to find a way through, trying to find a way to make it all stop.

And it did stop. . . for a while. And as the church bells in England rang out on that first Armistice Day, two soldiers showed up on the doorstep of Wilfred Owen's parents' house, to tell them that Lieutenant Owen had been shot and killed exactly one week earlier.

Men and women who give their lives in times of war, these are sorrowful reminders that the Kingdom of God is not here yet. That we have so much work to do. And their loss should cry out to us that we must find a better way. It's hard, yes, with demonic forces still loose in the world, stirring up hatred, violence, and injustice, but shame on us who refuse to believe that the Holy Spirit CAN work here among us, can work within us. Can lead us to better places. Those of us who pay lip service to building the kingdom of God, but wait for someone else to show up to do it.

The kingdom of God is not coming in the future, and we can't just sit and muddle through until then. The kingdom of God is here...now. We just have to work for it. We have to pray for it. We have to open ourselves to actually BEING that kingdom. Here in this world, now, in this world.

These precious lives that we commemorate on Memorial Day, here in America, remember them. Add them to the precious lives of all the men and women in uniform who have died in all conflicts and

remember them. And add them to all the innocents who died because of conflict and remember them. And if we don't try to build that kingdom, now, in the midst of all that hatred and violence and injustice, then those lives were lost for nothing.

Because that count is too high. And those times when the Holy Spirit breaks through are too few. We remember the Christmas Armistice because it was such an anomaly. An instant when we almost did it! When we almost unleashed that Spirit in each of us to rush through the world. Cleansing it. We almost did it, and we CAN do it.

As we remember today the children of yesterday who have died in battle, then tomorrow look at the children of tomorrow in your back yards. See the spirit of God in their eyes. Don't let that light go out. A Christmas armistice that stretches out forever!

Now that's worth fighting for.