

Short War, Eternal Peace

Why Christmas is Less Sweater & More Bullet-Proof Vest

December 6, 2015 // Trevor Atwood // Isaiah 9:2-7 // Christmas

The year was 1914. 6 months into WWI. British and German troops were fighting along “the western front” between Belgium and France.

On each side, soldiers spent their days and night in trenches, and in between those trenches was an area about the length of a football field. It was called “No Man’s Land”.

When a soldier left the safety of his trench and wandered into No Man’s Land, he was as good as dead. There was no defense there. Just a wide open space that neither army could claim. It was a field that at any moment could be filled with lifeless bodies of soldiers.

On Christmas Eve and Christmas day of 1914, something happened. Today, I want you to hear about this extraordinary day from the people who were actually there. Here it is in the words of Alfred Anderson, a British soldier who was a few miles away from No Man’s land.

“I remember the silence, the eerie sound of silence. All I’d heard for two months in the trenches was the hissing, cracking and whining of bullets in flight, machine gun fire and distant German voices. But there was a dead silence that morning, right across the land as far as you could see.” – Alfred Anderson, British Soldier.

What Alfred didn’t hear was roughly 100,000 British and German soldiers along the Western Front laying down their weapons in what is now known as the “Christmas Truce of 1914.”

Do you know what sparked it? Light. Candle light to be specific.

See, German troops decorated their trenches with candles and Christmas trees and begun to sing Christmas carols. When the British heard the songs, they started singing their own carols. Then, They began to shout “Merry Christmas” to each other.

Then it happened

Germans and Brits alike began to climb out of their trenches and make their way, unarmed, into No Man’s Land, and they came bearing gifts. They gave each other food and souvenirs like buttons and hats. They even performed joint burial services their dead comrades. At one point, they all started a football match. Of course, the Germans won 3-2.

Here’s another eyewitness account from a British soldier-

“I saw one of my machine gunners, who was a bit of an amateur hairdresser in civil life, cutting the unnaturally long hair of a docile German, who was patiently kneeling on the ground whilst the automatic clippers crept up the back of his neck.” - Bruce Bairnsfather

In other words, this British soldier performed the ultimate act of love, cutting his enemy's mullet.

Another soldier told about a Xmas sing-along.

“We ended up singing ‘Auld lang syne’ which we all, English, Scots, Irish, Prussians, and Germans joined in. It was absolutely astounding, and if I had seen it [in a] film, I should have sworn that it was faked!” – Captain Edward Hulse

This was an unbelievable day. The stuff of movies.

Somehow, simply because it was Christmas, bitter rivals served one another. People who yesterday exchanged gunfire, now exchanged buttons, and a field that was full of death, suddenly became a place to sing Christmas Carols, play football, and give haircuts. But it didn't last.

“We shouted ‘Merry Christmas’, even though nobody felt merry.

The silence ended early in the afternoon and the killing started again. It was a short peace in a terrible war.” – Alfred Anderson, British soldier

In fact in the 4 years of WWI that would follow this Silent Night, there was never another Christmas Truce.

So I wonder about that story. Is it really hopeful?

It certainly is kind of nice. But the killing started again. It was just a short peace in a terrible war.

It was a flicker of a candle in 4 and a half years of darkness. At best, it just seemed sentimental. It seemed like men who just decided to ignore the bigger issue for a day. Sure, they exchanged gifts, but in a couple days, they were shooting at each other again.

I wonder if this is how some of you feel about Jesus, about Christmas.

You think, “Oh great. Here we go for a couple of weeks with ‘Good Cheer’. But with all the promise of the big difference Jesus is supposed to make in my life and in the world, sure feels more dark than light. Sure feels more war than peace.

“Maybe this whole Jesus thing is just a sentimental ignorance. Maybe its just people who are trying to deal with life.

"A lot of people say 'War is Hell' but you know what, it kind of feels like 'Life is hell'.

"And I think this whole Christmas bit is a small way most of us ignore how bad things really are. Sure, there may be a Christmas truce with Carols and gift exchanges, but it's just short peace in a terrible war.

"By January 2nd, my co-workers will be gossiping about me again.

My spouse will still be cheating on me.

There will still be school shootings. ISIS will still be killing people, and honestly, I'd rather just not cover it up with giftwrap this year."

If that's you, I think it could be helpful to see how "non-sentimental" Christmas actually is.

Today, I hope you'll see that Christmas is quite a bit different from the Christmas Truce of 1914.

Christmas is not "A short peace in a terrible war" rather, it's a reminder that you and in are in a "short war in the middle of eternal peace."

Here we go:

Isaiah 9:2-7

**The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shone.
You have multiplied the nation;
You have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as they are glad when they divide the spoil.
For the yoke of his burden,
and the staff for his shoulder,
the rod of his oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.
For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult
and every garment rolled in blood
will be burned as fuel for the fire.
For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and of peace**

**there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.**

Here's what I want you to see today. I want you to see that the message of Jesus' birth is more than a sentimental flicker of candle in a dark world. Rather, the darkness is what's flickering, and the Light is here to stay.

1) Jesus was born to go to war with darkness. Any other Jesus is just sentimental.

I remember the first Christmas my family celebrated after our son died. There was a kind of echoing pain even in the middle of a normally happy time. There's something about Christmas, when families are supposed to be together, that you feel the loss of death, or divorce, or distance more acutely than most days.

Part of that is good. Death, divorce and distance between family members isn't a good thing. It's not something that God intends, and whenever we are experiencing life that isn't the way God designed, we should feel that hurt.

But sometimes, that echoing pain from a death or an estranged loved one, overtakes you not because you are believing God about who he says he is and what he loves, but because you aren't.

For example. Ask any number of people what Christmas is about and you'll have a good percentage of those folks say "It's about family." And if you believe Christmas is about family, what happens when some of your family isn't there? Well, you really can't celebrate the true meaning of Christmas, because your child died or your spouse divorced you. Then Christmas just becomes a time you dread.

Or a lot of people will say, "Christmas is about giving" Sounds good, right? But what happens when you don't have anything to give or nobody is giving anything to you? Well, Christmas becomes a time to be bitter, to focus on what you don't have or can't have, to be cynical. Christmas falls apart.

See, those are sentimental definitions of the "meaning of Christmas" Sentimental understandings of Christmas melt like snow against the heat of death, and divorce and distance. They are just "short peace in a terrible war". And that's why I love this passage from Isaiah about Christmas. But most of time, we love to skip ugly parts of this passage, the parts that are hard to understand, and print "For Unto us a child is born" on our Christmas Cards.

Verse 6 is nice isn't it? It's a good verse for some Hot Cocoa and Eskimos Kisses right? Those are some sweet nicknames for Baby Jesus, now let's open presents! But just like you notice a candle better when it's dark...lets make this verse shine a little bit by putting it in the context of the darkness it actually shows up in. Because this verse is less Christmas sweater and more bullet proof vest. In fact, that name "Mighty God" it literally means HERO. And take a look at verse 5.

"For every boot of the trampling warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire"

Put that on your Christmas card. Good grief. Looks like you need to don the family in army fatigues for your pictures this year. People would be like "What is this the Hunger Games?"

Here's what's going on: Isaiah was a prophet that was sent with a message from God to King Ahaz in Jerusalem about 700 years before Jesus was born. Now, the story about King Ahaz and the nation of Judah is a bit complicated for me to work out this morning, but let me put it like this:

A war was getting ready to go down in the Middle East. A big ugly nasty war. Through Isaiah, God told King Ahaz not to take sides in this war, but to trust Him for protection.

But Ahaz didn't listen. Imagine that during WWII, Winston Churchill got so nervous about the Nazi's that instead of leading Britain to fight them. He just joined them. That's what Ahaz did. Except it wasn't Nazi Germany, it was Assyria.

So then, God speaks publicly to the people of Judah through Isaiah. That's what's happening in chapter 8-9. God warns Judah not to follow King Ahaz but to seek Him as their help in this war.

In chapter 8 He says, "Don't go to psychics to have hope for the future. Don't worship false gods for your safety. They'll never help you. Instead, listen to me. I'm the only God with control in this nasty war. Trust me."

And then, Isaiah tells them what's going to happen if they don't trust what God is saying to them.

He says, "You'll look at King Ahaz and curse him for getting you into this mess, then you'll look at God and curse him because you'll believe he's not doing anything about it. Then you'll look at what's happening around you and all you'll see is distress, darkness, the gloom of anguish, and you will be thrust into thick darkness."

Does this sound like your Christmas? Short peace in a terrible war? Flickering light in thick darkness? Well, that's where chapter 9 comes in like a boss.

In the middle of thick darkness, of the depth of the ugliness of death and war and bitterness and cynicism, into the deep darkness, the Light has shined!

You see those words, deep darkness? I bet you think he means spiritual darkness. I bet you think this is the same old sentimental Christmas stuff. But that's not all we are talking about right here. That word "deep darkness" is literally "the death shadow" Which is simultaneously a bible verse and an extraordinary Ninja name.

You know what this shadow is caused by? All the stuff Judah saw when they looked at the earth. Not when they looked in the hearts or into the heavens (though that's important)

You felt this death shadow when you hear about the San Bernardino shootings. You felt the presence of the death shadow on Sept 11 2001. It's the reality that War is Hell and when you look at your life, it's a lot more war than peace.

The death shadow is all around us, not just in big tragic events, we are all living in the shadow of death. Let me put it like this. If the sun went out today, just like BAM, and it's gone. It would be 0 degrees Fahrenheit by the end of the day. It would be -100 degrees by New Years day. Eventually, we'd bottom out at 400 degrees below zero. There would be no light, so there would be no photosynthesis. That would kill the plants which would cut off our major source of Oxygen.

Most people would suffocate before we had time to create an alternative oxygen source but for the people who did survive. Eventually their bones would start to crumble from a lack of sunlight that produces Vitamin A & D. When the sun goes out, we would slowly but surely die.

Or think about it like your Thanksgiving turkey. If you left your turkey out after Thanksgiving, in 4 hours- it gets cold, but it's still edible. In 4 days- it starts to smell bad. It might still be edible, but definitely not tasty. After you leave it out for 4 weeks- it turns to poison. See, that turkey is losing it's energy. It's going bad. It's under the shadow of death.

That turkey is you! When you look at that turkey...you are looking at your future. As you grow older you are not getting better. You are falling apart. But a lot of you are young. You don't get this because turkey that's four hours old makes a great sandwich still. But I'm telling you, you are trending toward dying and so am I.

In fact, our whole world is. One day, the sun is going to burn out. One day, you and I are going to die. The question is do you accept this as natural? Is this the just what happens? Or do you hate it?

Do you look at the shadow of death and say "this isn't right"?

It's interesting. No matter how many people I talk to that tell me that "Death is natural" when it happens to people they love or admire, they hate it. They mourn.

We all resist the shadow of death. We all hate that we live in a world where we can't avoid death and where it always feels like it comes too soon. This is why we can't settle for a sentimental Christmas. This is why Jesus can't just be a good teacher or a moralistic fable that teaches us about humility and how to be nicer to each other.

He's got to be a Warrior. He's got to be a mighty God. He's got to be a prince of peace because my son is dead, and I'm dying too and so are you.

So Jesus better actually be doing something about death or else we're just singing Christmas carols while we wait to get hit by the next bullet.

So let's talk about what this hero God is doing right now and then forever.

2) Jesus was born to cure our disease. He doesn't start with the symptoms. He starts with our heart.

Here's a question you might be asking. If this Child to be born is so great, if he's so much a prince of peace, and light in the darkness, then why is the world still as messed up as it is?

I get how this was a future prophecy for the people of Judah. Jesus hadn't been born yet. But now, he's been born, Hark the Angels and O little town of Bethlehem and all that. So what gives?

Why does my dad have cancer? Why did a husband & wife leave their baby last week to go shoot people at a work Christmas party?

Why didn't Jesus, if he hates death like I do, if he's such a warrior, why didn't he didn't do something about that? Well, if you're asking that question, you aren't alone.

In fact, regarding the San Bernardino shooting, the cover of the NY Daily News on Thursday read "God isn't doing anything about this" as it quoted well known politicians talking about how they were praying for the victims and their families. In other words, "Stop Waiting for God to do something and do something yourself."

Alright, on one hand, I get that. People who use prayer as an excuse not to help someone, well, the Bible condemns that. But to say, it's time to abandon God, because look how bad things are, well, that's exactly what King Ahaz did and that's what God is telling us we absolutely cannot do.

So let me show you why we are still under the shadow of death even though "The child, who is a Mighty Hero has already been born."

You know if you go to the doctor because you are sick, you always expect that doctor, if he's a good doctor, to not simply treat things you tell him are wrong. You want him to run some tests and see if there's something deeper going on.

Can you imagine if you were having chest pains...so you go to the Doctor and he just gives you some aspirin without even checking your heart, and so you look at him and say, "Doc, I'm glad you are helping me with my pain...but don't you even want to see if my heart's healthy?"

You wouldn't think he was a very good Dr. If he looked back at you and said, "Look, you are complaining about chest pain, that Tylenol will knock that pain right out. What more do you want from me."

That's a bad doctor. That's a Quack. A good doctor looks for heart disease and treats that. No good doctor only treats symptoms, because if you only treat symptoms without knocking out the disease itself, the symptoms always come back, and eventually you die from the inside out.

All the death that we hate, all the deep darkness, they are symptoms of a disease. They are the results of a sinful heart. See, the light that shines in the darkness from verse 2 comes through this child in verse 6.

So here's the question, where does the darkness come from? How does this child fix it? Well in Genesis 1, there is darkness everywhere, just a void. And then the eternal God says "Let there be light," and the whole thing lights up.

But did you ever notice the sun doesn't get created until the fourth day. So how is there light without a sun? Well, the end of the Bible answers that for you. In Revelation, after all things are made new, when Jesus comes the second time, it says in this New Heavens and New Earth, there is no need for the sun anymore, because God himself is our light.

Revelation 21:32

And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb.

That Lamb is another name for Jesus. See the disease of humanity is what happens between Genesis 1 and Revelation 21. In Genesis 1, humans rejected the glory of God. We rejected the light. That's what sin is. It's our disease. We cashed in the glory of God for our own glory. We decided to come up with our reason to live, instead of enjoying a friendship with God. And when that disease took root in humanity, everything broke. Yes, our disease has a spiritual root, but it works itself out all the way to physical symptoms.

When we chose to reject God, like King Ahaz, when we pushed him aside, not only did our hearts break spiritually, they broke physically. Now with every beat of your heart you, are unwinding. In fact, every part of creation broke. And we all went to war with each other. That's why we hurt each other. That's why we fight each other. We're all trying to get control of a world that is spiraling towards death. But into that death, the Good Doctor made a house call.

When John wrote about Jesus' birth he said,

John 1:9, 12

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world...to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,

The cure for our disease is this. God himself, came to humanity in Jesus Christ, but he didn't do it to give us a good example of how we should live. He did it to live for us, in our place.

Do you see what it says here? It says for all those who believe in the Jesus, the light. They have the right to become children of God.

Not for all those who imitate Jesus.
Not for all those who learned from Jesus.
Not for all those who think Jesus was a good guy.

For those that believe.
That trust him.

But John also says in John 3:19,

And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.

See when Jesus was born, yes there were angels and shepherds and eventually wise men. But most people didn't pay attention to Jesus at all. In fact, most people tried to kill him, because he was taking away their control.

See, all of us are trying to fix things. Just like King Ahaz did when war threatened, when death was at the door, Ahaz ran around sacrificing to idols. He did everything he could to stop the war, except the one thing that would actually do it, trusting God.

See, Ahaz trusted the Assyrians, and they eventually overtook him and enslaved his people. Even though Isaiah had told him, a child is going to be born, a son is given to you as a sign, he didn't listen, because he knew it meant he had to wait for God, and he needed a quick fix.

See, sin is idolatry. That just means replacing God with something else you think will save you. We want to fix our hurt. We want to reverse death. We want to save ourselves with anything that doesn't require us to wait on God. We want to feel like we are in control of our solution.

So we don't trust God. When his light comes into our darkness, we reject it because we love to keep control. But that is what brought the darkness into our lives in the first place.

Listen, God did not send his son to condemn you. Jesus was born to rescue you. You want to know why the world is still broken even though our hero has been born? Because when you wouldn't wait on God, he decided to wait on you.

See, if Jesus came to go to war with sin and death, as long as you are still consumed with idolatry, as long as you are rejecting the light and embracing the darkness, you don't want Jesus to deliver the knockout blow to sin and death.

Because you'll go with it.

When Jesus came the first time, it was to save you from the condemnation of sin. To fix your disease. When he comes the second time, it will be to eliminate the symptoms of darkness.

You know that line in "Joy to the World"? "And every heart prepare him room" You know what that means? It means that the good doctor starts with your heart. He starts with disease, not the symptoms. Right now, Jesus is ready to clean up your heart.

See there are two advents in history. Advent just means the arrival of someone important. The first advent happened in a manger and ended with a cross. In the first advent Jesus brought relief from your sin. He made a way for you to be a child of God.

The second advent will happen with a warrior coming in the clouds on a horse with a sword. Right now, we are waiting for Jesus to come back. We are waiting for the last battle, where Jesus puts death to death. Where he finishes what he started.

But in the meantime, he's waiting for us as we're waiting for him.

He's waiting for people from every tribe tongue and nation to trust him as the cure for their sin disease and until then he tells all his brothers and sisters, "Wait. I'm coming. But in me, know that you are safe."

And see, that means that when I think about Christmas. It's not short peace in a terrible war. It's the opposite. The darkness, the ugliness, the death, the sin I wait through now is a relatively short war compared with the eternal peace Jesus is bringing when he comes back.

Isaiah 9:7 says **"Of the increase of his kingdom of peace...there will be no end."**

Do you know what that means? It means, that when Jesus comes back, his perfect kingdom with only light and no darkness, with only good and no evil, his perfect kingdom with only life and no death, not only does it go on forever in his perfect kingdom, the next day will always be better than the one we just had.

See, it's the reverse of the sun burning out. It's the reverse of the turkey decaying. It's the opposite of getting older. It's getting newer!

Right now everything is unwinding, getting worse and worse, but when Jesus comes the second time to bring New Heavens and Earth, every thing will get better and better, newer and newer.

But until then, we keep asking him to come back, and in the middle of the darkness, we keep shining the light of the good news.

That the Light of the world has come. We aren't in a moment of short peace in a terrible war, we're in a moment of short war before eternal peace. The doctor has made a house call, and he's already dealt with disease. Now we are just waiting for the symptoms to clear up.

One last very important thing.

3) Jesus is a gift. You can't fight for him, only against him.

In Isaiah's prophecy, he talks about what life is like if you reject the light. If you reject this child to be born. If you reject the only salvation God has provided. Take a look at Isaiah 8:9-10.

**Be broken, you peoples, and be shattered
give ear, all you far countries;
strap on your armor and be shattered...
take counsel together, but it will come to nothing;
speak a word, but it will not stand, for God is with us.**

Isaiah tells them, if you reject God with us, Immanuel, if you reject God's only salvation, you will try to fight your own battles, you will try to push back the darkness of sin and death. You will take counsel together, but you will end up broken and all of your plans will come to nothing.

Do you feel that today? Does it feel like everything you've done to be happy has failed? Everything you've done to overcome your past has let you down? All the self-improvement projects, all the diets, all the books, all the New Year's resolutions, haven't really changed you? It's time to stop fighting a war you can't win. Did you notice that Jesus is a gift? Look in Isaiah 9:6a.

A son is given. You can't earn him. You can't buy him. You have to humbly receive him. Your instinct is that the only way to make your life better is to fight, to earn it. But God is telling you, if you do that, you end up broken and all your efforts come to nothing. The only way to win is to admit you've already lost, to wake up and see God is With Us in Jesus.

If you try to prove to God that you can do it, that you're strong enough and tough enough or good enough to get yourself out of sin and death, well, not only are you not letting Jesus fight for you, you are fighting against him.

Jesus can only be received as a gift you don't deserve. Anything else, and you're at war with God. See, look what this child does in verse 5. Because of Jesus, you can throw all of your war boots, all your armor, all your battle fatigues in the fire, and you can climb out of the trench and walk into no man's land. Because on the cross, Jesus already fought and won for you.

On the cross, Jesus walked into the No Man's Land of sin, and though he came in peace, we killed him. But when that happened, he was dying in our place. He was taking the penalty for our sin, so now, we don't stand in condemnation at war with God, instead, we are peace with him forever.

Jesus took a bullet, so you get a haircut. God, who we made our enemy, came to our trenches and gave us a gift. We gave him our sin, and he gave us the right to be children of God. We gave him our brokenness, and he made us whole.

See, Christmas is about family but only as a sign to the family God creates through Jesus. Christmas is about giving but only as a sign pointing to the gift God has freely given to you in Christ. Once you take away Jesus' war with sin and death from Christmas, it's just sentimental. The truth is, God is fixing this. And one day in His Kingdom, we'll say, "If I had seen it in a film, I should have sworn it was faked"

And one day, after the second advent, we'll be like the soldiers at the Christmas Truce, former enemies, former diseased and dying soldiers, now getting newer everyday, in peace together forever.

Except, maybe we'll change the lyrics of Auld Lang Syne. Maybe instead, we'll sing about the Glory of the Son of God. The Light of the world. The lamb who was slain in no man's land to get us out of the trenches of death.

But for now, in this Short War, church, our job is to prepare the way for Jesus' eternal peace. I'll leave you today with Luke's words.

Luke 1:76b-79

**for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins,
because of the tender mercy of our God,
whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."**

