

In 2000 the band U2 released a mournful song entitled “Peace on Earth”. You will occasionally hear it played on the radio this time of year.

It is a provocative song that poses a powerful question...

*Jesus in the song you wrote
The words are sticking in my throat
Peace on Earth
Hear it every Christmas time
But hope and history won't rhyme
So what's it worth?
This peace on Earth*

This song was the band's response to the August, 1998 Omagh City bombing, which targeted shoppers and was believed to have been planted by the extremist group, The Real IRA. The bombing dealt a serious blow to the Good Friday Peace Accord, at the time only a few months old.

Bono was listening to Irish radio that day and heard the names being read out of the 29 victims. “*They're reading names out over the radio, all the folks the rest of us won't get to know, Sean and Julia, Gareth, Ann and Breda, their lives are bigger than any big idea.*”

The situation in Northern Ireland is complex and deeply embedded. For many people observing the troubles, one tragic aspect is that people of the same faith, who worship the same God, have for decades waged a bloody battle. Sadly, the fighting made it clear that our religion had failed to fulfill the kingdom Jesus preached about.

A poignant lyric in U2's song is “*But hope and history won't rhyme.*” This is undoubtedly an allusion to Seamus Heaney's “The Cure at Troy” an adaptation of Sophocles' “Philoctetes”. The dissonance between history and hope is a timeless dilemma.

I believe that we retell the Christmas story each year because in it history and hope do indeed rhyme. So listen again to the Christmas Story...

An unwed pregnant teenager is going with her boyfriend to a strange town. The baby is born while they are there. They couldn't find a proper place to stay, so they made do with a space in a stable. The girl believed that the baby was conceived through the action of the Holy Spirit. Remarkably, the young man believed the same thing. Furthermore, he promised to marry her after the baby was born and promised to help raise the baby.

And from that outrageous beginning we fast-forward to 2012. Approximately 2000 years later we are getting ready to celebrate Jesus' birthday again.

So why do we keep telling the story every year? There is only one answer...*Holy Hope*. One of the consequences of the Christmas message is that it gives us holy hope. God intervened in human history, and in so doing, teaches us that things can change.

A smelly barnyard and the embarrassment of an unplanned pregnancy is one way that the reality

of God is made known to us. This Christmas story is remarkable precisely because it wasn't cool, or precious, or funny or flashy. (Well maybe the Angels were flashy, but they didn't appear to kings and rulers, they appeared to humble shepherds caught out in the field.)

God is at work in the simple places and in the most unexpected ways. God is at work in everyday people like you and me.

How do we make history and hope rhyme? We make things rhyme through a global transformation. While unlikely that we can convene peace accords, we can, with daily action, bring our history into alignment with our hope in God. As we strive to be people of character, transformed by the grace of God, we use our moral agency to transform our part of our world.

Can you do anything this Christmas to help create some peace on earth? History judges the Christians of Northern Ireland. And there is real hope that people can change!

History will judge us...your own history will judge you.

Did you forgive someone when they hurt your feelings?

Did you use your money and the resources of the earth wisely?

Did you share even when nobody was there to make you?

Bono's Christmas song has some holy hope in it too. He prays to God, *Jesus can you take the time to throw a drowning man a line— 'Peace on Earth'*

Do remember the story of how the disciples were on the Sea of Galilee when a terrible storm came up and they were sure they were going to drown? Peter saw Jesus coming across the water and in his holy hope stepped out of the boat into stormy sea.

Peter began to sink and cried out to Jesus. Jesus took him by the hand and saved him. That was not failure. That was a metaphor for the life of faith. We can take risks because God loves us and even intervenes.

The power of Jesus' birth and life transcends time and place and brings us down to this very moment. That is the truth of Christmas. History and hope rhyme in the birth of a little baby come to bring...peace on earth.

Peace on Earth!