42-02-11-I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day
Advent, Christmas, suffering, grief, tragedy, war, peace
Luke 2:14
Advent is humanity’s highest hope that Good will triumph in the end.

INTRODUCTION: (HOM.idea the theme of the carol (title).
—[Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote “Christmas Bells” during the Civil War, in which his oldest son was severely wounded. Two years earlier he lost his wife, whom he was still mourning 20 years later. The Scripture phrase referred to in the poem is the angelic announcement of the 1st Advent—Luke 2:14 (NKJV), “Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, good will toward men.” Ten years before he died, his poem was set to the familiar tune we know today:"

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
and wild and sweet \ The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men! \ It was as if an earthquake rent
And thought how, as the day had come,
And the belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along \ The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men! \ And in despair I bowed my head;
Till ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime, \ A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men! \ Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound \ The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men! \ It gave God exactly the same human heart that we have
And made forlorn \ The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men! \ For hate is strong, \ And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men! \ And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong, \ And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men! \ Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound \ The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men! \ It gave God exactly the same human heart that we have
And made forlorn \ The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

C. Because we were made in God’s image, we were given hearts that can be hurt because God has one. (BUT the 1st Advent reversed it: it gave God exactly the same human heart that we have.)

TRANS: In the “Our Father...” we pray God’s “kingdom come,” that His will be done on earth as it is in heaven. God’s answer was to send heaven to earth by His Son to becoming one of us. The earth is hurting! Earthly hearts are hurting! But God has joined us in the pain. Christ’s birth brought the promise of “peace on earth, good-will to men!” Advent established humanity’s highest hope that Good will triumph in the end.

II. God Allows the Hurting Heart to Question Him
A. God isn’t angry if we question, doubt or even disagree with Him:
1. He listened patiently to the complaint of the prophet Habakkuk—Hab 1:2-3, O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. –Hab 1:13, You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?
2. He made sure the questions of the Psalmist became part of the Bible—Psa 44:23, Why, O LORD, do you stand far away? Why do you hide your face from me? Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever! –Psa 88:14, O LORD, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me?

B. The whole book of Job is about a hurting heart questioning God, but God’s concern in the end was that Job kept communicating with Him (which Job’s three friends who accused him did not). [Charles Williams (intro, Paul’s “the pot” & “the potter”): “The Book of Job... has saved Christendom from being misled by Saint Paul’s rash refusal to allow the thing formed to ask questions of him that formed it, the pot of the potter:... No pot—so far—has asked questions of the potter in a voice the potter can understand; when it does, it will be time enough to compare pots to men. The criticism is not aimed at Saint Paul who dropped the phrase in the midst of a great spiritual wrestle, not as a moral instruction. But it has been used too often by the pious to encourage them to say, in love or laziness, ‘our little minds were never meant...’ Fortunately there is the book of Job to make it clear that our little minds were meant. A great curiosity ought to exist concerning divine things....The Lord demands that his people shall demand an explanation from him. Whether they understand it or like it when they get it is another matter, but demand it they must and shall. Humility has never consisted in not asking...
TRANS: In the midst of tragedy, grief, suffering, we ask “Why, God? How could You let this happen to me, my loved ones, my nation, my world?” In despair, Longfellow’s poem says: “Why do heavenly bells ring out a promise of ‘peace on earth, goodwill toward men,’ when cannon blasts are drowning out the message?” But the last stanza gives the answer: Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: “God is not dead, nor doth He sleep; The Wrong shall fail, The Right prevail, With peace on earth, good-will to men.”

III. God Wants the Hurting Heart to Trust Him for the Outcome

A. God will end all war, all hunger, all suffering, exactly at the best time possible—Rev 21:1. Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away... (God is in a cosmic balancing act that takes account of every person, all their actions [including prayers], and all results of every interaction of those actions, to make sure the best of all possible outcomes happens.)

B. God will heal hurting hearts and eliminate their pain—Rev 21:4. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. [Sadhu Sundar Singh, in a vision of the afterlife, saw a man who died as a child and grew up in heaven welcoming his aged mother who had just died: “All around were matchless and exceedingly beautiful mountains, springs and landscapes, and in the gardens was abundance of all kinds of sweet fruits and beautiful flowers. Everything the heart could desire was there. Then he said to his mother, “In the World, which is the dim reflection of this real world, our dear ones are grieving over us, but, tell me, is this death, or the real life for which every heart yearns?” The mother said, “Son. this is the true life. If I had known in the world the whole truth about heaven, I would never have grieved over your death...”]

CONCLUSION:

—Angels announced “on earth peace, good will toward men” at the 1st Advent, because Christ’s Incarnation brought the platform for that promise. At just the right time—the best time—God will say, “Curtains!” to this world’s history, and the 2nd Advent of Christ will fulfill that promise: “The Wrong shall fail, The Right prevail, With peace on earth, good-will to men.” —[Gandhi said, “A man with a grain of faith in God never loses hope, because he ever believes in the ultimate triumph of Truth.”] Advent brought the Savior Who will fulfill this universal hope for Good to triumph in the end!