

Silent Night

Carols of Christmas Series #4

Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

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*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined.*

*For a child has been born for us, a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

*His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*
Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

I invite you to take a deep breath. Imagine that what is above you is a starlit night....
.....and in this moment, all is calm and all is bright.

Today we are focusing on the carol "Silent Night." This year is the 202nd anniversary of the debut of "Silent Night, Holy Night." It has become one of the best-loved Christmas carols. Something mystical occurs when we light our candles and sing the hope of "all is calm, all is bright" for the world on Christmas Eve. We will certainly miss doing that in person this year.

Let's look at the history of this carol. Created out of necessity and performed in a tiny village on a solitary Christmas Eve by two ordinary Austrians and a tiny choir, this incredibly beautiful and simple carol owes its debut to an organ that would not play a note and a priest who persevered to bring joy to his congregation.

In 1817, twenty-five-year-old Joseph Mohr was assigned to the position of assistant priest in Saint Nicholas Church in Oberndorf, Austria. A lover of music since his boyhood in Salzburg, Mohr was placed in charge of the music used at the small church. He even wrote poems and song lyrics for special services. A tireless and giving man, he spent much of his spare time ministering to children from the area's poorest families.

In 1818, during a particularly cold winter, Mohr was making last-minute preparations for a special Christmas Eve Mass, a service he had been planning for months. Everything from the music to message was in place. However, as he cleaned and readied the sanctuary, the priest

encountered a challenging dilemma: St Nicholas's organ wouldn't play. A frantic Mohr struggled with the old instrument for hours, making adjustments, fiddling with the keys, stops, and pedals. He even crawled behind the console to see if he could fix the problem. In spite of his efforts the organ remained silent, its voice as still as a dark winter's night.

Realizing he could do nothing else, the priest paused and prayed for inspiration. He asked God to show him a way to bring music to his congregation on the year's most meaningful night of worship. Mohr would find the answer to his prayer from events almost two years before.

In 1816, while assigned to another church, Mohr had written a Christmas poem. The simple stanzas were inspired on a winter's walk from his grandfather's home to the church. Though he had shared the words with a few friends, the priest never sought to have the work published or tempted to come up with a melody to go with his words. When Mohr was transferred to the church in Oberndorf, he had brought the poem along with him.

That night he dug into his files to find that poem "Stille Nacht!" He read over the words that he had written two years before. As he read the words again, it was as if the Spirit moved him and gave him hope, hope this was his answer to prayer. He shoved the worn paper into his coat pocket and rushed out into the night. It was only hours before the Christmas Eve service was to start.

On that same evening, thirty-one-year-old school teacher Franz Gruber was struggling to stay warm in his drafty apartment over the schoolhouse. Although he had once studied organ, he played the instrument only for Saint Nicholas's special services. Gruber must have been surprised to hear an insistent knock at the door and find Father Mohr on the other side. In a stressed tone of voice, Mohr explained the problem they faced. After he convinced Gruber nothing could be done to fix the organ, Mohr showed Gruber his poem. "Franz, can you write music to these words that can be easily learned by our choir? Without the organ I guess the song will have to be played on a guitar." The priest glanced at the clock on the table and added, "The time is so short!"

Studying the poem, Gruber nodded his head. The look in his eyes show that he felt up to the challenge. Confident that God would guide this effort, Mohr raced back across the snow to the church, leaving Gruber alone with his thoughts, a ticking clock, and a prayer.

A few hours later the two friends met at Saint Nicholas. There, in a candlelit sanctuary, Gruber shared his new music with Mohr. The priest was thrilled and after learning the guitar chords, rushed it to the choir members who were waiting for their scheduled rehearsal.

I try to imagine what that would have been like in our church if I had written a new song and rushed to give it to Martha and Allen on Christmas Eve during a choir rehearsal! I'm sure they would be gracious, but can imagine some frantic words and stressful moments!

That night in 1818, in what should have taken weeks was accomplished in hours. In the little time they had, Mohr and Gruber taught the choir members the four part harmonies to the last two lines of each verse. Just after midnight, Mohr and Gruber stood in front of the sanctuary and introduced their simple little song. As they sang, they couldn't have guessed that "Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!" would be remembered not only the next Christmas in their small village, but for over 200 Years around the world.

During the 19th century, Austria and Germany has scores of traveling folk singers. Many of them learned "Silent Night," performed it, and it spread throughout the countryside and communities. In December of 1839, an Austrian family group named the Rainers travel to New York. As part of one of their performances, the family sang "Stille Nacht" in English for a huge crowd at Trinity Church. It was such a popular number that other local groups began to sing it in church. By the time of the Civil War, "Silent Night" had become America's most popular Christmas carol. During the battles between the Union and Confederacy, it was not unusual for hostilities to pause for 4 days starting on December 25th, with troops from both sides laying down their arms to come together to worship, share gifts, read scripture, and sing "Silent Night."

One of the most famous stories about this beloved carol took place during World War I. British and German soldiers on the front lines called a truce on Christmas Day in 1914. So close were the encampments from which they were fighting one another, they could hear each other in the peaceful quiet of the truce singing "Silent Night," each in their own language of English and German. This prompted the soldiers to come out and meet on the battlefield, without weapons, and they spent the day playing soccer and exchanging small gifts, whatever they had. I have read letters from soldiers that attest to this event. It makes us wonder - is it possible to bring calm and bright to our own corners of the world even in the midst of great conflict?

Let's look more closely at the words of "Silent Night" the original poem.

*Silent night, Holy night, all is calm all is bright
'Round yon virgin, mother and child
Holy infant so tender and mild
Sleep in Heavenly peace, sleep in Heavenly peace.*

This verse reminds me of some of the conversations we have had on Wednesdays as we have been reflecting on the book *Honest Advent*. This past week Parish Associate Kay Colette lead the reflection on the word "virgin." Part of the conversation that has been meaningful to me is that the Christmas story reminds us that we are being held in Divine love like a womb and as a mother holds a child. This verse also invites us to reflect on what it means to hold the presence of God. In this time of the last year of the pandemic and also during the season of Advent, we can focus on rebirthing, within and without. Gestation as a time of growth in the

darkness. It seems like the darkness seems deeper and broader this year. What is God's invitation to you now? What is stirring in you? What is happening in the world because of this past year and what might be born anew as we come out of the pandemic? In this time waiting and darkness, we can be present in a silent night, holy night, trusting Divine love showing us that all is calm and all is bright.

The second stanza

*Silent night, Holy night, Shepherds quake at the sight
Glories stream from heaven afar
Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia
Christ the savior is born, Christ the savior is born.*

The images of fear and glory are woven together. We think of the story of the shepherds that night. The shepherd's got quite a wake-up call that night when the sky lit up and they heard the angels sing. Awe at the transformative glory of what God can do in our lives. Glories are streaming every day if we only have eyes to see. How would our lives be renewed if we saw the world and our lives through the lens of wonder and awe?

And the third stanza

*Silent night, Holy night, Son of God, Love's pure light
Radiant beams from thy holy face
With the dawn of redeeming grace
Jesus Lord at thy birth Jesus Lord at thy birth.*

This verse reminds me of artwork of the nativity, with Mary and Joseph and shepherds standing close to the manger. And the light is coming from the Christ child, light coming up from Love Incarnate. The presence of God in human form is the "dawn" of redeeming grace. As worship designer Marcia McFee puts it, "God so desired to be up close and personal that God came to live, breathe, feel, teach, touch, and love. Made in the image of God, we are called to nurture relationships that birth, multiply and radiate grace in the world. What would the world be like if Love's pure light was at the center?"

In the midst of this long year of the pandemic, isolation, deep divisions, uncertainty, and waiting, we entered this season of waiting of Advent.

The story of Christmas of Jesus' birth

brings holy hope, peace, joy, and love
in the form of a baby.

This holy infant, tender and mild, was a sign of new life,
a sign of holy vulnerability,
a sign of Divine Presence enfleshed in our human form.

This would be the light that showed forth the truth that all humanity is beloved and calls us to care for each one as beloved.

May the words of this carol remind us
of Joseph Mohr who waited until his words were needed
and Franz Gruber who wrote the beautiful melody that night
so people could know and sing of
holy deep love and peace at Christmas in all times and places. Amen.

Resources

Ace Collins, *Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
(2003) pp.152-157

Marcia McFee, "Calm and Bright: Celebrating 200 Years of "Silent Night" (2018)
Worship Design Studio, <http://marciamcfee.com/>