

Christmas Eve 2018 4:00 pm

Silent Night

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What is your favorite Christmas carol? There are no wrong answers, only you know your favorite. One of my favorites is *Silent Night*. Anyone like that one too? It certainly is a famous Christmas carol, even if it isn't your favorite.

It was exactly 200 years ago this very night, Christmas Eve in 1818 that *Silent Night* was sung for the very first time. It happened in St. Nicholas Church in Oberdorf, Austria, a town just north of Salzburg. Perhaps you are familiar with the history of how the popular carol *Silent Night* came to be: the words are a poem written by Joseph Mohr, a Roman Catholic priest. It is believed that Mohr wrote the words as a poem two years earlier, in 1816. And when the organ at the church was not working that Christmas Eve in 1818, he went to his friend, Franz Gruber, who was the church organist and asked him to put music to his poem, so they would have music for the Christmas Eve service. Gruber did indeed write the music we are so familiar with and at the late service *Silent Night* was sung by two solo voices – Mohr's and Gruber's- with guitar accompaniment. It was instantly loved by the parishioners.

A few years later, a master organ builder was at St. Nicholas working on organ maintenance when he discovered the sheet music for *Silent Night* and took a copy with him. He passed it on to a family of folk singers, sort of like the Von Trapp family from *The Sound of Music* only different, and that family made *Silent Night* part of their act. They traveled around the world, singing *Silent Night* everywhere they went, including America where it was translated into English, which is how it became loved the world over. To this day, there isn't a church service that doesn't include singing *Silent Night* as part of their Christmas Eve celebrations.

Perhaps the most well-known Christmas that featured the carol *Silent Night* was Christmas Eve in 1914, in the early days of World War I. It has become somewhat of a legend that on that Christmas Eve, a German soldier in one of those terrible trenches that war was mostly fought from began singing *Silent Night* in his native language. And while the English soldiers in their own terrible trenches not too far away did not understand the words, they knew the music, and began singing *Silent Night* in their own language. That, legend tells us, is how the Christmas Truce of 1914 began, by the singing of *Silent Night*. In honor of it being Christmas, the soldiers on both sides declared -- even it was only temporary -- peace. They stopped fighting and crawled out of their terrible trenches of war to meet each other with smiles and handshakes in what is called "No Mans' Land." They celebrated Christmas by burying their dead,

something the fighting had prevented them from doing, shared food and drink, sang carols, and exchanged things like buttons and pins as gifts. Some even say they played soccer with a makeshift ball. And, even if it was just for a day, there was peace in No Man's Land.

This type of peace during a war has only happened this one time and is remembered as a miracle. It is also very Incarnational. That is what we are here this afternoon to celebrate: The Mystery of the Incarnation, of God becoming flesh and dwelling with us, of a woman giving birth to her firstborn child and laying him in a manger because there was no room for him in the inn. The way the author of Luke's Gospel tells us about Jesus' birth is that God found room to be with humanity even when humanity declared we didn't have any room. Because God loves us so much, and wants to be with us so much, God won't let anything get in the way of being with us. Not a crowded city. Not a crowded heart. And, as in the Christmas Truce of 1914, not a war. The Christmas Truce is called a miracle because it reminds us God is not only present with us, God is willing to go with us wherever we go, even into a place as terrible as the trenches of WWI. Even as terrible as a cross. Because even the worst we humans do to each other can be redeemed by God, and even the worst among us can find new life with God on the other side of terrible. That is the Incarnation, that is the Mystery of God with Us today, and that is what was in the middle of No Man's Land Christmas of 1914, which might have begun with the singing of the carol, *Silent Night*.

There may be another reason *Silent Night* was able to inspire such a magnificent Incarnational miracle. Because there is more to the story of how that carol came to be; it is a story that also embodies the Incarnation, of God being with us, of making room to be with all of us.

When Joseph Mohr was born, his parents were not married. His father left his mother not long after he found out she was pregnant. In those days, that was considered a serious offense and serious problem for the child. Such a child was branded with the cruel label "illegitimate" and could legally be denied baptism, an education, employment, even marriage. Joseph Mohr was lucky because a curate, a priest at the Cathedral in Salzburg, Austria, took custody of him and made sure Joseph received a good education. He also noticed Joseph had a beautiful singing voice and had him trained in music. Joseph sang in several church choirs. But when he wanted to be ordained a priest, he needed special permission because he was illegitimate; which of course he did receive.

The second parish Joseph Mohr served was the fairly new St. Nicholas in Oberdorf, where he was an assistant. That is where he met and became friends with Franz Gruber. Joseph Mohr was loved by all the parishioners mostly because one of the things he did at St. Nicholas was translated all the Latin hymns into German, so that all people could sing them and understand them.

That was very Incarnational work, making the holy knowable and accessible to all people regardless of age, gender, education, class, or economic standing. But it was also incredibly controversial. You see, the established church was still of the mindset that holy words like the mass and holy songs like hymns were only supposed to be in Latin, that was considered the holy language of God. So not everyone loved Joseph Mohr for what he was doing. According to the Silent Night Museum in Salzburg – by the way I have not been able to find many other sources that support this account, so please take it this Christmas Eve for what it is – the Rector of St. Nicholas not only disagreed with the work Joseph Mohr was doing translating Latin hymns into the native language of all people, especially poor people, he was jealous of Mohr's popularity with parishioners. So, the Rector decided to bring up Mohr's illegitimacy in order to smear or ruin his reputation in the parish.

But his good friend Franz Gruber got wind of the plan and decided to do something to help his friend and that is where the story of the organ not working on Christmas Even comes into this. You see, there are no records of any kind that support the organ at St. Nicholas Church in Oberdorf, Austria being broken or needing work in December of 1818. This has led the good people at the Silent Night Museum in Salzburg believe it was Gruber who only said the organ wasn't working so the rector would have to allow Mohr's and Gruber's new hymn written in German to be sung with guitar accompaniment – something so very incarnational and very contrary to the traditions of the time.

Sacrificing something for a friend like that is also Incarnational, for Jesus made a sacrifice to show us the new life he invites us into, one that makes room for God by making room for all people: the poor, the wealthy, those in between, and most especially those in between, in the many kinds of no man's lands there are in world. The one Joseph Mohr knew as a child born out of wedlock. The one the poor and uneducated of his parish knew. The one the soldiers in WWI knew. The no man's land anyone who feels lonely or that they don't fit or belong or have been rejected know all too well. Anyone and everyone who feels there is no room for them. That is the good news of great joy for all people that was announced by angels at Jesus' birth: that God made room to be with us and in so doing, has made a Kingdom where there is room for all of us.

That is the message in the music of *Silent Night* and may be why it has been loved for 200 years, and undoubtedly will be loved for many more. I hope this night is one where you all feel a bit closer to the heavenly peace of God with us.

Merry Christmas to you all!