

Silent Night

Luke 2:1-20

John Breon

The last several weeks we have looked at some of our favorite Christmas hymns—exploring their background and drawing out themes from them. Tonight, we come to the number one song in our Christmas carol survey: “Silent Night.”

We have also thought about memories associated with Christmas music and these songs in particular. How many times have we sung “Silent Night” at Christmas Eve services? In some of our memories it’s indelibly connected to holding lighted candles. Another memory I have is singing “Silent Night” as a lullaby to our children.

The story of how “Silent Night” was written has been told in many places. We may know less about this hymn’s origins than some of those tellings indicate. But it likely went something like this:

In 1818, Joseph Mohr was a twenty-six year old assistant priest at St. Nicholas’ Church in Oberndorf, a village in the Austrian Alps. I think it’s interesting that our favorite Christmas hymn came out of a church named for St. Nicholas. In the days before Christmas, the old church organ was out of commission. Legend says that mice had chewed through the bellows. It would be spring before the traveling organ repairman would be in the area to fix it. This created the obvious problem that there would be no organ accompaniment for Christmas Eve Mass.

To help remedy this, Mohr approached thirty-one year old Franz X. Gruber, the organist at St. Nicholas and a schoolteacher in a neighboring village. Two years prior, when Mohr was assigned to a small church in Mariapfarr, he wrote a poem depicting the birth of Christ. Mohr asked Gruber to set the poem to music so they could sing it together with guitar accompaniment at the midnight service. They named their composition “Song from Heaven,” and unveiled it December 24, 1818. Since then, it has become the classic carol we know as “Silent Night.” It has been translated into virtually every language and has become a standard for Christmas Eve services around the world.

Think of the historical context of when this song was written. Napoleon had waged war across Europe. There was chaos, confusion, struggle to adjust to new political realities. Maybe Mohr wrote this poem about silence and holiness because those qualities were missing from the world at that time.

Mohr and Gruber never realized how popular their little song would become. Since "Silent Night" was written as a stop-gap when the organ quit, the pair didn't plan on the song being sung after the initial performance in 1818. In fact, the two men parted ways shortly after Christmas as Mohr was transferred away from Oberndorf. The song's popularity was localized and then soon forgotten.

However, in 1825, Karl Mauracher was hired to rebuild the organ at the St. Nicholas church. After making the repairs, Mauracher asked Gruber to play the organ to check the tuning. Gruber played "Song from Heaven." Mauracher loved the song and requested permission to take the song back home with him to the Ziller Valley in the mountains of Tyrol. Gruber gave him permission and Mauracher took a handwritten copy of the words and musical notation of "Song from Heaven." The Ziller Valley was home to folk choirs who performed for wealthy noblemen all over Europe. One of these singing groups was the Strasser Children's Quartet who spread "Silent Night" wherever they went. They performed at the Royal Saxon Court Chapel in Leipzig and the Royal Court of Berlin in Prussia. However, without copyright laws, no credit was ever given to the composers and the song became associated with the Ziller Valley folk choirs. The song commonly became known as "The Tyrolean Folk Carol."

Then, in 1854, the director of the Royal Court Choir of Berlin began to research the origins of the carol because it was the favorite Christmas hymn of King Friedrich Wilhelm IV of Prussia. The director was a curious academic who traced the true origins of the carol to Salzburg where Mohr had first written the poem in 1816. If not for this disciplined research, we might never have recognized Joseph Mohr and Franz X. Gruber as the composers of "Silent Night."

This research was confirmed in 1997 when a volunteer at the Carolino Augusteum Museum in Salzburg discovered an original handwritten Mohr

manuscript. Handwriting experts dated the manuscript to 1820, making it the oldest known manuscript of "Silent Night."

Another interesting note in the history of "Silent Night" is that for many years English hymn compilers set it aside as unworthy to be included in major collections of hymns. Although it first appeared in English translation in a Methodist songbook in 1849, it was not included in most British hymn collections and did not enter the Methodist hymnal until after 1900.

So the story of "Silent Night" is the story of Christmas in more ways than one. Things that have humble beginnings and may even be looked down upon can be the beginnings of world-changing events. A baby born in a stable in a backwater town far from the seat of power in Rome may not have seemed like much at the time. But here we are celebrating that birth and honoring the One born that night.

The many seeming coincidences surrounding the writing and spread of "Silent Night" help us see something of how God takes humble gifts and uses them for his glory. Greg Tolle, after telling the story of "Silent Night," tells of a personal experience that is related to the story. One day, not long after Greg had read the story of "Silent Night," a man named Bill Warner came to visit him. Bill was a Roman Catholic and the widower of a member of Greg's church. He stopped by the office bringing a four-foot high wooden crucifix for Greg to see. The crucifix was carved of apple-wood by Bill's great-grandfather. Along with the crucifix Bill brought a framed newspaper article from a Ft. Smith newspaper dated December 24, 1967. The article showed pictures of the large crucifix and told how it had been passed through the family and eventually to Bill's mother.

The article also shared the story of Bill's talented great-grandfather who was skilled in more than just woodcarving. He was also a very talented organ craftsman who lived in the Ziller Valley of Austria in 1825. Bill's great-grandfather was Karl Mauracher, the man who helped spread "Silent Night" throughout the world.

Greg concludes:

Was it a coincidence that I read the “Silent Night” story a few days before Bill’s visit with me? No, of course not. It was the unfolding of a God story. It was a gentle reminder that God is in our midst. Which, not so incidentally, is what Christmas is all about. (*Lectionary Tales for the Pulpit, Series IV, Cycle A, 21-24*)

Let’s think about how the song “Silent Night” helps us hear and tell the Christmas story. The first verse celebrates the virgin mother and her child Jesus, the “holy infant so tender and mild.” This is the lullaby verse, praying the baby would “sleep in heavenly peace.”

Whenever I hear verse 2, I think about a little boy in a church I served when I was a seminary student. We were at some gathering and singing Christmas carols when Geoffrey asked to sing the song about the “sheperheads.” I didn’t understand and asked what he meant. He said, “You know, the one about the sheperheads quake.” Then we realized he was misreading “shepherds.” And this second verse is about the interaction of the shepherds and the angels—humility and glory meeting when the Savior is born.

Verse 3 adores the Son of God, who is “love’s pure light.” It speaks of radiant beams shining from Jesus, showing us the “dawn of redeeming grace.” I don’t think that means the infant Jesus glowed in the dark. These radiant beams of love and grace are seen by faith, not with physical eyes. John the Baptist’s father, Zechariah, had seen this light by faith even before Jesus was born. In Luke 1, Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesies: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.” A little later he concludes by announcing that “by the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (68, 78-79).

This verse also affirms that Jesus is already Lord when he is born. One purpose of the stories of Jesus’ birth in the NT is to proclaim that Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord. We still announce and celebrate the lordship of Jesus in the face of all other powers.

Verse 4 brings in Matthew's story that tells about the wondrous star. Then we are invited to join the angels in singing praise to Christ the Savior.

This is a lovely hymn and there's no wonder it's so popular. But as I think about the account of Jesus' birth, I have to wonder, how silent was that night? Just how quiet could it have been?

There was a bustling, crowded town. Mary and Joseph were in a stable, with animals chuffing and chewing. A birth is not usually a quiet affair. And newborns are not often very quiet. After Eric was born, I was with Nancy in her room. The baby was in the hospital nursery so Nancy could get some rest. We could hear this shrieking coming from the direction of the nursery. When a nurse came in, we commented on that. She said, "Oh, that's your baby." We sometimes get this image of Jesus as a sort of magical baby who never cried, but he was a real human baby and I imagine he cried that night as much as any newborn.

There were angels speaking and singing to shepherds, breaking the silence. Then the shepherds went tromping around Bethlehem, trying to find a stable with a newborn baby in it. Then they came into the stable telling about angels and all they had heard about this child.

But then we get to verse 19 of Luke 2. Finally, there is silence in the stillness of Mary's heart as she ponders all these things. After all the excitement and activity of the birth and the arrival of the shepherds, Mary and Joseph are able to settle down. Mary is able to rest, nurse the baby, then sing and rock him to sleep.

"Silent Night" may be our favorite carol because we long for some of that stillness. We want to experience something like that peace. The world can be so noisy and distracting. But with Jesus present and at the center of our lives, there can be this still calmness in our souls. As we ponder these things in our hearts, God's word speaks out of the silence and we know peace that can guard our hearts and that can help us deal with all the frenzy around us—and even within us.