

Redeeming Grace

The third sermon in the Advent/Christmas series

“Calm and Bright: 200 Years of ‘Silent Night’”

by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher

Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio

December 16, 2018—Third Sunday of Advent

- Titus 2:11-14 (New International Version) ¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. ¹² It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, ¹³ while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, ¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.
- John 1:3-17 (excerpts) (New Revised Standard Version) What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it... ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth... ¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: In coming among us in Jesus the Son God has redeemed our lives to serve God’s purposes in the world.

Just a few weeks ago, with Thanksgiving still in our rearview mirror, the season of Advent stretched out before us: four Sundays—a span of time that children probably wondered if they’d *ever* be able to get through. But here we are, more than halfway toward the Christmas destination. And like a calendar marks our passage through a month, each succeeding verse of the beloved Christmas carol “Silent Night” takes us toward Christmas Eve when we’ll mark the 200th anniversary of the song’s first appearance by singing its verses in candlelight.

The third verse is printed in your bulletin right under the sermon title. As we’ve done with other verses for the past two weeks, let’s join together in *speaking* the words of that verse, in the hushed voice we’d use sitting next to a sleeping baby:

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.

On a cold Christmas Eve in 1818 pastor Joseph Franz Mohr (1792-1848) walked the three kilometers from his home in the Austrian village of Oberndorf bei Salzburg to visit his friend Franz Xaver Gruber (1787-1863) in the neighboring town of Arnsdorf bei Laufen. Mohr brought with him a poem he had written some two years earlier. He desperately needed a carol for the Christmas Eve midnight mass that [very night]. He hoped his friend, a school teacher who also served as the church’s choir master and organist, could set his poem to music....

Recent flooding of the nearby Salzach River had put the church organ out of commission, so [in a matter of just a few hours] Gruber composed the music for guitar accompaniment. A few hours after Gruber finished his composition, he and Mohr stood before the altar of the St. Nicholas Church in Oberndorf to perform

their own work. A local choir group backed them up as the sounds of the brand-new carol broke the silence of that “*Stille Nacht*.”¹

The English language version we know today was translated from the German in 1863—that was in the midst of America’s Civil War. An Episcopal priest in New York City named John Freeman Young enjoyed translating European carols for American churches.

Translating rhyming poetry is very difficult work, and this third verse from “Silent Night” has a very complicated structure in English. In fact, most of the verse is one sentence, though it’s constructed awkwardly and the punctuation doesn’t help. But if we decipher this complicated verse we’ll discover scriptural truth.

Please look at the verse. One line ends with the word “light,” and the next line begins with the word “radiant”: “light radiant” really means “radiant light.” The order was reversed for the sake of the poetry. So the line can be understood as “love’s pure, radiant light...,” but the phrase continues: “Love’s pure, radiant light beams from thy holy face.” What a beautiful poetic image, to describe the face of the infant Jesus as aglow with divine love like a light radiating beams of comforting illumination.

God’s incarnation in Jesus is a “light” illuminating a new way of life for us. John’s gospel describes the advent of Jesus as a model for a new, compassionate way of “life.” Like moths are drawn toward a light at night, Jesus’ new way of living—concerned more for others than for self—Jesus’ new way of living will be a “light” drawing people to God.

The subject of the sentence, of course, is the one who is called “Son of God.” So now the carol describes *who* and *what*: “Son of God, love’s pure radiant light beams from thy holy face...” Next, what’s the purpose of this divine action, this incarnation, this taking-on of flesh, God’s appearance among humankind? The next phrase explains: with the pure light of God’s love being made visible to humankind in the birth of Jesus we realize we’re witnessing what the carol calls “the dawn of redeeming grace.”

“The dawn of redeeming grace...” “Dawn” can be a powerful experience, if you’re able to get out of bed that early. It’s one of my favorite times of day. Last week I went to visit someone in jail in Mansfield. I had to leave home very early, and even by the time I arrived outside the prison walls for my visitation appointment it was still dark outside. But as I sat in my car staying warm until the gate would be unlocked, dawn was breaking. Bit by bit the hidden countryside was revealed, first by silhouette, then by glimmers of daylight slowly crawling up over the eastern horizon, until eventually I could see my surroundings for the first time: the slope of the hill below me, the harvested fields across the road, the barren woods on the other side of the stream. The dawning of the day cast light to illuminate my situation; I learned more about where I was.

Joseph Franz Mohr used that familiar experience of witnessing the dawning of a new day. In writing “with the *dawn* of redeeming grace” he means that the birth of Jesus announces the presence of God’s redeeming grace.

But what is this “redeeming grace?” Redemption is a churchy-sounding word, and we may not really understand what it refers to. Here’s an example. We all have seen movies about a kidnapped victim being held for ransom. When the family seeks to set their loved one free by paying a ransom, they are redeeming that person—they are “buying them back” from the danger of the evil-doers.

¹ <https://www.german-way.com/history-and-culture/holidays-and-celebrations/christmas/stille-nacht-silent-night/>
accessed 12/11/18

In the carol, dawn is a metaphor for how we realize that God seeks to claim our lives. God chooses to redeem our lives despite our acts of neglect or unpleasantness or selfishness or intentional hurt. God is at work redeeming us, rescuing us, making us useful to serve God's will, making us worthy of God's everlasting blessing. By God's incarnation in Jesus it "dawns" on us that God has set in motion God's redeeming grace.

Redeeming grace is God's divine influence at work to save us.² God invites us to align our words and thoughts and deeds with God's will. God's redeeming grace grants mercy, inspires virtue, imparts strength, bestows love. In the birth of Jesus we behold the dawn of a new day – redeemed by God to live a new way for God's service and God's glory. As we heard in the short New Testament letter to Titus, in the birth of Jesus God's redeeming grace has dawned in our lives "to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good."³

Christmas is not a burden chastening us to work harder at "doing better" or "being a better person." God's gift at Christmas is the gift of God's redeeming grace. We didn't earn God's favor. We don't deserve God's goodness. God claims you, rescues you, redeems you because it's God's nature to love and to nurture. It's God's nature to understand and to forgive. It's God's nature to heal and to offer hope. What's our part, then? Simply this: to notice that love's pure radiant light beams from the face of our Infant Savior, announcing the dawn in our lives of God's redeeming grace.

[Sermons: se20181216; © 2018 Jon M. Fancher]

² "Grace" has been defined as "the divine influence which operates in humans to regenerate and sanctify, to inspire virtuous impulses, and to impart strength to endure trial and resist temptation; and as an individual virtue or excellence of divine origin." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine_grace, accessed 12/11/2018

³ Titus 2:14 New International Version