

Wondrous Star

The fifth sermon in the Advent/Christmas series

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

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Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio

December 24, 2018—Christmas Eve

- Isaiah 60:1-3 (Good News Translation) Arise, Jerusalem, and shine like the sun; the glory of the Lord is shining on you!
²Other nations will be covered by darkness, but on you the light of the Lord will shine; the brightness of his presence will be with you.
³Nations will be drawn to your light, and kings to the dawning of your new day.
- Luke 2:1-20 (Common English Bible)¹⁵ When the angels went away from them back into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us.”
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Because the unconditional love of God made available in the birth and life of Jesus, “all is calm, all is bright.”

If we were to magically transport ourselves back in time by 201 years and found ourselves in a church on Christmas Eve in the Year of Our Lord 1817, one thing is for certain: we would not have sung the carol “Silent Night” because it hadn’t been written yet. You are in church on an historic occasion, because tonight – Christmas Eve in the year 2018 – marks the 200th anniversary of the first time anyone sang or heard “*Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht...*” – “Silent Night, Holy Night....”

It was the afternoon of Christmas Eve in the year 1818. Joseph Mohr was the pastor of St. Nicholas Church in an Austrian village. He put on his coat, picked up the paper on which he had written a poem about two years earlier, and walked to a nearby village. There he asked his friend Franz Gruber if he could possibly compose a tune to which his poem could be sung. You see, the organ at St. Nicholas Church had been put out of commission by the flooding of the local river, and Pastor Mohr was hoping to enrich that night’s service with a new Christmas carol. In a short time Franz Gruber had a tune sketched out, and just hours later, Pastor Mohr played the guitar as he and Gruber sang the song in worship for the first time.

Like many churches, this church uses the four Sundays leading up to Christmas as a way to prepare for this holy night. This year we’ve done that by looking at the four verses of “Silent Night” more closely, each week selecting a phrase from a different verse:

- We’ve noted God’s desire for “Heavenly Peace” in our world.
- We’ve searched for signs of how God’s “Glories Stream” into our lives.
- We’ve welcomed God’s forgiveness and encouragement offered by God’s “Redeeming Grace.”
- And we resolved to “Let Us Sing ‘Alleluia’” – that is, “Praise the Lord” – to the one born to be our king.

(If you’re curious, you can find those messages in audio or print formats on our website.)

This carol may be unique in its ability to connect people. Translations have enabled “Silent Night” to be sung by people around the world – an estimated 140 languages to date.¹ Even without a common language, the familiar tune has literally made neighbors out of enemies. You may have heard the true story of the so-called “Christmas Truce” that occurred on Christmas Eve 1914 in the early days of World War I. That temporary stoppage of hostilities was brought about, in part, because British soldiers on the Belgian front heard the sound of “*Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht*” being sung in the trenches by their German counterparts, and so the Brits responded by singing “Silent Night, Holy Night.” As I shared a few weeks ago,

¹ <https://www.german-way.com/history-and-culture/holidays-and-celebrations/christmas/stille-nacht-silent-night/>, accessed 12/19/18

...[British] troops noticed at dawn [that] the Germans had placed small Christmas trees along parapets of their trenches. Slowly, parties of men from both sides began to venture toward the barbed wire that separated them, until...“literally hundreds of each side were out in no man’s land shaking hands...”

“We are Saxons, you are Anglo-Saxons,” one shouted across no man’s land. “What is there for us to fight about?”

...In most places, up and down the line, it was accepted that the truce would be purely temporary. ...[F]or the most part [soldiers were] determined to preserve the peace at least until midnight. There was more singing, and in at least one spot presents were exchanged....²

Tonight when we join our voices in “Silent Night” at one point its lyrics will have us offering this simple prayer: “Wondrous star, lend thy light.” “Wondrous star, lend thy light....”

- We immediately picture a brilliant star shining down on the little town of Bethlehem.
- We envision a remarkable star lending its light to guide shepherds from the hillside fields and through the narrow streets of the sleepy village.
- We recall the report of the Magi telling King Herod that a compelling star was lending its light to guide them from distant lands in search of the newborn King of the Jews.

But let’s remember another “Wondrous Star,”

- ...lending light to people who feel mired in the darkness of discouragement and disappointment.
- There is a Wondrous Star lending light to people frozen by fear of things changing too fast to keep up with.
- There is a Wondrous Star lending light to couples trying to see their way to strengthen a relationship damaged by neglect or betrayal.
- There is a Wondrous Star lending light to parents striving to see how they can best support and guide their children, and lending light to adult children struggling to care for aging parents.

Jesus is God’s light shining in the dark places of our lives.

God has entered the realm of our activity in the birth of Jesus. In the Babe of Bethlehem, we are gifted with God’s unconditional love, God’s limitless mercy, God’s life-giving forgiveness, God’s bottomless reservoir of hope for healing of body and spirit. We are God’s creatures, loved by our Creator, empowered by God to show loving-kindness for friends and strangers, to show respect for allies and opponents, by what we do and what we say and how we say it.

God’s gifts are ours without regard to whether we feel we’re worthy or not. That’s hard for some of us to believe – that we don’t have to earn God’s favor. In our daily lives we always seem to have to prove how good we are, how deserving we are. But in sending Jesus into our world God proclaims that God is with us all... without exception... unconditionally... now... forever.

Tonight, “while visions of sugar-plums [dance] in [our] heads”³ we remember and celebrate a “Silent Night, Holy Night” of 200 years ago. But that night has meaning because of a Wondrous Star that first illuminated the world on a night over 2,000 years ago. That is when God’s love took on flesh in the birth of Jesus. Now, because Jesus lives in our hearts, “All is calm, all is bright.”

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² Mike Dash, “World War I: 100 Years Later--The Story of the WWI Christmas Truce,” December 23, 2011 at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-story-of-the-wwi-christmas-truce-11972213/#VdT8pARz1b6mDpM.99>, accessed 11/30/18.

³ Clement Clarke Moore, “A Visit from St. Nicholas” at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43171/a-visit-from-st-nicholas>, accessed 12/18/2018