

Singing in the Season: Silent Night
Luke 2:1-20
Christmas Eve
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Rev. René Jensen
First Christian Church
Omaha, Nebraska

When we were planning our Advent/Christmas sermon series *Singing in the Season*, an exploration of the meaning and stories behind a few of the songs of Christmas, we had a lot of trouble deciding which beloved old Christmas carols and which new favorites we would preach on. Christmas music is such a treasure trove—narrowing it down to just five songs was extraordinarily difficult.

Except for Christmas Eve. Christmas Eve was easy. It *had* to be “Silent Night.” For many of us, it isn’t really Christmas unless we sing this much loved carol. I have a colleague in ministry who decided to change everything about the Christmas Eve worship one year, so he omitted lighting candles while singing “Silent Night” from the service. There was almost a riot in the church.

I have to confess I would have been among the complainers. You may recall two years ago we had a blizzard roll in on Christmas Eve. Many churches cancelled their services for that evening. After much angst, here at First Christian we decided to go ahead and have our service, but when the decision was still up in the air, I told my husband Rick, “If we have to cancel worship tonight, I’m going to sit under the Christmas tree with a candle and sing ‘Silent Night,’ because Baby Jesus doesn’t get born until I do that.”

For a lot of us, Jesus doesn’t get born until we sit in the flickering candlelight and sing this beloved carol.

***Sing (A capella) 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.***

In many ways, "Silent Night" has become synonymous with the gentle, holy, heavenly peace that we all long for during this busy season and yet so often miss. Singer-songwriter Amy Grant has even written a song about it, called "I Need a Silent Night."

*I made this same mistake before
Too many malls, too many stores
December traffic, Christmas rush
It breaks me till I push and shove
Children are crying
While mothers are trying
To photograph Santa and sleigh
The shopping and buying and standing forever in line
Well what can I say*

*I need a silent night
A holy night
To hear an angel voice
through the chaos and the noise
I need a midnight clear
A little peace right here
To end this crazy day
With a Silent Night*

Perhaps one reason we come here tonight, one reason we come back year after year, to light our candles, and sing the beloved old carol is because we need to end not just this crazy day but this crazy season with a Silent Night, with a glimpse of that first holy night so long ago.

What is it about this simple carol, out of all the beautiful, moving songs of Christ's birth that speaks to us so deeply and moves us so profoundly? Perhaps the

power of the carol comes in part from the almost miraculous way that it came into being.

In 1817, a young priest named Joseph Mohr was assigned to St. Nicholas Church in Oberndorf, Austria. A poet and lover of music, Father Mohr was responsible for the music in the parish. On Christmas Eve morning in 1818, Father Mohr cleaned and readied the sanctuary for that evening's service, which he had spent months planning. To his dismay, he discovered the church's organ wouldn't play. He fiddled with stops, tinkered with keys and pedals, and crawled behind the console to see if he could find the problem. Nothing helped—the organ remained stubbornly silent.

Father Mohr began to pray, asking God to show him a way to bring music to his congregation on this holiest of nights. Like most of us, he couldn't imagine Christmas without music. When his prayer ended, he suddenly remembered a poem he had written two years earlier, "Stille Nacht! Hellige Nacht!" When he had written it, the poem had seemed unimportant. He had tucked it away and almost forgotten about it. But now, as he pulled the poem from the back his desk drawer and re-read it, he felt as if God were showing him the way forward. He grabbed the poem and hurried to the home of Franz Gruber, a thirty-one year old schoolteacher who was also the church's organist. Father Mohr explained what had happened to the organ and showed Franz his poem. Could the organist write music for the words? Something simple enough that the choir could learn it quickly? Moreover, without the organ, the only available accompaniment would have to be a guitar.

It is a true Christmas miracle that Gruber was up to this almost impossible challenge—to produce in a few hours something that would normally take days, if not weeks. Yet surely guided by the hand of God, Gruber found the perfect music to go with Father Mohr’s poem. That night, at the Christmas Eve midnight mass, in a small church lit only by flickering candlelight, to the simple strumming of a guitar, Joseph Mohr and Franz Gruber introduced their simple little song.

Sing

(solo w/guitar accompaniment)

***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.***

A broken organ. A half-forgotten poem. A melody written in haste and sung to a simple guitar in a small church in an obscure village. From these unlikely elements was born the most loved Christmas carol of all time.

And from the unlikely elements of our lives—broken dreams, half-forgotten hopes, recovered innocence—God can yet fashion a manger in which the Christ Child can be born in us, bringing gentleness, peace, and love. Bringing a silent night, a holy night, suffused with the glow of God’s unfading presence.

Sing

(Solo/w guitar)

***Silent night, holy night,
Wondrous star, lend thy light,
With the angels let us sing,
Alleluia to our King;
Christ the savior is born, Christ the savior is born.***